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The Community Initiative LEADER I and the implementation and results of the Hungarian Pilot LEADER programme in rural development

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Abstract. The aim of this study is to present the basic methodological elements of the LEADER Community Initiative in rural development established in 1991 and its practical implementation in geography. The most important principle of the LEADER programme is the territorial approach and the appearance of local communities in a relevant subregional and landscape context. The determination and creation of a natural and cultural geographical framework is not at all an easy task, although the LEADER cautiously puts down basic principles and makes clear references to spatial definition of local action groups. The aim of LEADER I is to demonstrate the spatial segregation of these communities and to evolve a particular image and a kind of critical mass (population, resources) to build a relative self-sufficiency.

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1. Introduction

An examination of the results of the Community initiative shows that the effectiveness of the programme is based on a solid platform of regional territorial planning. The research analyses the base spatial conditions at community level and compares the situation of an old member state to our country during the implementation of LEADER I between 1991–1994 and the Hungarian Pilot Programme LEADER between 2001–2004.

The late presentation of the LEADER programme results from the fact that the European Commission wants to return to the beginning of the LEADER when the programme existed as an independent community initiative. In the 2007–2013 budget period, according to the opinion of the Committee of Regions, the LEADER development programme has lost its innovative and unique methods in rural development and has been subordinated to the general European Agriculture and Rural Development policy. Before joining the EU as a new member, Hungary introduced an 'installation' test programme, but the results were not convincing in a period of policy development when the LEADER methodology lost its independent role in the region's development. This study presents the planning implications and the importance of the LEADER methodology.

2. Methods

Comparing the LEADER I programme and the Hungarian Pilot LEADER has not been in the focus of scientific research. Although the programme is not a new development, for the 2014–2020 subsidisation period, the EU wants to return to its roots and to apply the principles and the experience of the programme. In terms of research methodology, the first step is to process the reported community statistics, the second step consists of analysing a survey of Bavarian local action groups which participated in LEADER I, LEADER II and LEADER+.

3. The start of the LEADER programme in EGK (EC)

The European Communities launched an initiative for rural development in 1991 which laid down innovative approaches that were to enable rural areas to implement their development plans with relationships with relevant spatial units. The importance of the programme is based on two theories: first, there needs to be a centre of attraction in the relevant area; second, to find locations and positions, as well as economic and social energies that define the critical mass. This settlement 'crowd' will determine the extent of the catchment area (Ray, 1998; Dubost, 2008).

The LEADER I Community Initiative tried to close up the 1, 5b and 6 target regions by extending the Pilot methods of the European regional policy. LEADER became the reform of structural policies, and even today it is the key determining factor of rural development policy.

4. Initial position, results and overall impact of the programme

LEADER has laid down an approach which was not part of the traditional village development policies and which can be defined as follows: (a) geographically bordered, agglomeration region-minded approach; (b) bottom-up approach, essential local participation in development process; (c) formulation of new development needs and their thematic linking with all socio-economic subsystems (global approach); (d) founding a Local Administration Group (LAG); (e) organising a networking system at national and community level; (f) supporting cooperation within the community or with a third country that helps the development of the LEADER region; (g) independent financial management (Shucksmith, 2000; Stöhr, Schenk, 2001;)

The European Commission approved 217 local action groups for LEADER I development plan for the 1989–1993 period. At the end of the programme 215 were evaluated. The programme

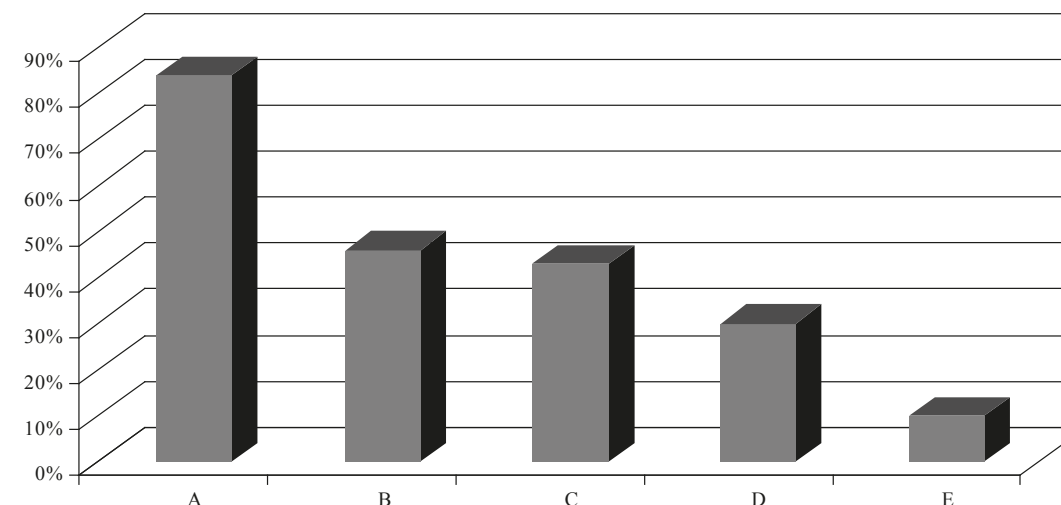


Fig. 1. Feature selection conditions of LEADER I LAG

Explanation: A – geographical identity; B – economic coherence; C – traditional roots; D – administrative boundaries; E – political motivations

Source: Own work

included a total area of 362.000 km² and 11.3 million inhabitants, and it affected 60% of the target regions: Spain, France, Portugal, Italy, Ireland, and Greece.

The LEADER programme is in many ways interesting to applied geography. The prior (ex-ante) situation analysis, the determination of spatial arrangements and relationships meant an excellent professional task for higher education institutions (including German universities) that were actively involved in innovative local development plans and completed sections of ex-post evaluation. Science thereby contributed to a positive vision for the future where the idea of the Regions of Europe could be realised. LEADER I methodology and its effect on geography had the following results: (a) the designation of the LEADER areas was enabled by geographical, economic, social, and administrative demarcation. Of course, during the demarcation of areas a number of conditions were taken into account (Fig. 1); (b) based on the geographical environment it can be stated that instead of coastal and insular areas a slight dominance of hilly-mountain areas emerged. In the North fisheries while in the South tourism were the dominant activities. Furthermore, it can also be stated that regions characterized by peripheral and the so-called ultra-peripheral position (remote, disadvantaged areas)

were sufficiently represented; (c) the LEADER I areas are basically sparsely populated with often unfavourable demographic conditions and specifically limited economic development opportunities. Of course, there were exceptions, for example Portugal, where cities were also part of the programme (but not subsidy beneficiaries). Portugal is the future of LEADER because the focus today is on village-city relation systems, at least in Germany (Hutter, Neidhardt, 2005) Population density was higher in these areas than in the 5/b regions, which is not surprising, since the 5/b objectives were directed at rural regions.

5. The LEADER I programme in Germany, and the overall experience in Bavaria

LEADER I programme started in the 5b regions: high agricultural employment, typically agricultural regions (Horvath, 2002). In Germany, a total of about 13 Pilot areas received a grant of 23.8 million ECU. The exchange rate between € and ECU was 1:1 in 1999, so the subsidisation per local action groups calculating with 270 HUF exchange rate was about 494 million HUF (31/12/2009).

Out of 13 local action groups 10 were implemented by regional institutional framework;

2 groups were guided by Ltd.; and the Hesseni Rhön group was guided by an association. The focus of the association's activities in the first stage of the programme concerned transport and tourism, and the planned investments were to begin within the framework of LEADER II. The Rhön Biosphere Reserve local business development group primarily supported design work and a whole series of smaller projects. LEADER also supported interregional projects concerning regional development, except those concerning investments, in which only local target forces could be complemented. Of course, there were other opinions stating that money should rather be invested in investments instead of planning and paying the professionals of the local action groups but they admitted that without careful groundwork the future of LEADER was in question (Stöhr-Schenk, 1997). The German LEADER I contained the following elements: (a) tourism; (b) increasing the value of agricultural production (value-added); (c) small and medium-sized enterprises,

local crafts; (d) investment in intangible assets (training, extending new development methodology); (e) further arrangements (protected areas, Environmentalism, improving the quality of local life – the concept includes evolvement and development of urban services e.g.: configuring Internet network, creating telecentres, community spaces); (f) creating a common image (forming the LEADER 'image' and standards – trademarks, ensuring the quality of local products) (Stöhr-Schenk, 1997).

The opinions about the success of German LEADER I: according to the presented opinions LEADER I was able to ensure the success of the developers' work by providing targeted interventions, it managed to generate positive reactions concerning the development of the regions, and also proved to be supplemented by other subsidisation (Table 1). The presented opinions were less conclusive about the financial backing of LEADER and pointed to bureaucratic obstruction. They did not think that the European LEADER was a priority.

Table 1. Judgement of the LEADER I subsidy

	A	B	C	B	A	
The idea of LEADER as a European network had great significance during practice	○	○	○	○	○	The idea of LEADER as a European network had minimal significance during practice
LEADER created satisfactory opportunities for the realization of our goals	●	○	○	-	-	LEADER excluded many thoughtful development initiatives
LEADER has enabled targeted interventions for the regions	●	○	-	-	-	LEADER has disabled targeted interventions for the regions
LEADER was adapted to the situation and the problems of the regions	○	●	○	○	-	The LEADER objectives are too general in nature
LEADER gave room for me to realise my local development notions	○	●	○	-	-	LEADER did not help with my local development notions
LEADER has a non-bureaucratic structure	○	○	○	○	○	LEADER is bureaucratic
LEADER is a financially well supplied program	○	○	○	○	○	LEADER does not have sufficient financial resources
LEADER promotes local developmental effects	●	○	-	-	-	LEADER does not promote local developmental effects
LEADER principles have a positive impact on the region	●	○	-	-	-	LEADER principles have little impact on the region
LEADER proved to be well supplemented by other subsidisation	●	○	○	-	-	LEADER prevented the involvement of other potential subsidisation

Explanation: The varieties of the '○' symbol mean the weighted percentages calculated from the responded answers; A – agree; B – rather agree; C – neither

Source: Stöhr, Schenk, 1997

The German experiences should have been exemplary for our country in the sense that instead of building up resources relying on LEADER only they should have also based their territorial strategies on community or regional resources. The increase of regional development and territorial cohesion was an important experience according to the presented opinions.

We used geographic and regional development issues of the evaluation of the Bavarian LEADER I ex-post (2010). The results showed significant differences from those documented at that time. Although the research did not focus on Germany, but one province only, solid conclusions can be drawn on the basis of 50% of the received questionnaires. The results show decrease in the role of LEADER and also in the value-added development set in the region.

The first and perhaps one of the most important issues in regional development is the designation of the region's geographic boundaries. In LEADER+ and the 2007–2013 LEADER Community planning documents LEADER regions are referred to as homogeneous with respect to geographic, economic and social aspects. In the configuration of a region these aspects should be considered. A further

provision of the Community directives states that it is about free groups of settlements, that is why other administrative boundaries do not play any role in the configuration of the regions. In many cases it is not recommended to adjust the border of the regions to administrative boundaries because it makes it more difficult to create an integrated geographical, economic or cultural region. Region defining conditions are shown in Fig. 2.

Unfortunately, it is clear that the most important factor in defining the boundaries of a region is the adoption of administrative boundaries. The importance of geographical boundaries dropped from 84% to 46% compared to LEADER I. Economic homogeneity did not play a major role in the 2007–2013 region defining process which is a major factor in terms of tourism, agricultural, craft and wine regions.

The study also involves the major factors of the current local action groups that ensure territorial cohesion. The respondents had to weigh the listed conditions where 1 is marked as the most important factor and 5 is marked as the least important factor (Fig. 3).

The respondents linked the long-term survival of the local action groups to local political conditions.

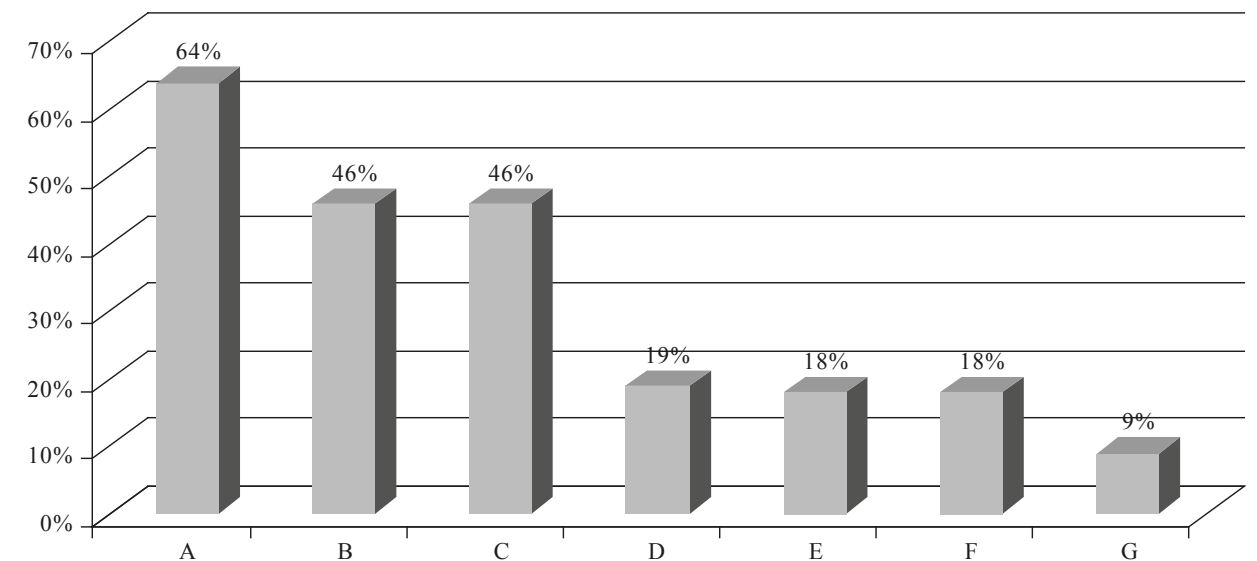


Fig. 2. LEADER region defining factors in the 2007–2013 period (own work)

Explanation: A – administrative boundaries; B – local identity; C – landscape boundaries (geography); D – accommodation to the catchment area; E – economic coherence; F – expertise of the regional university; G – application to political pressure

Source: Own research

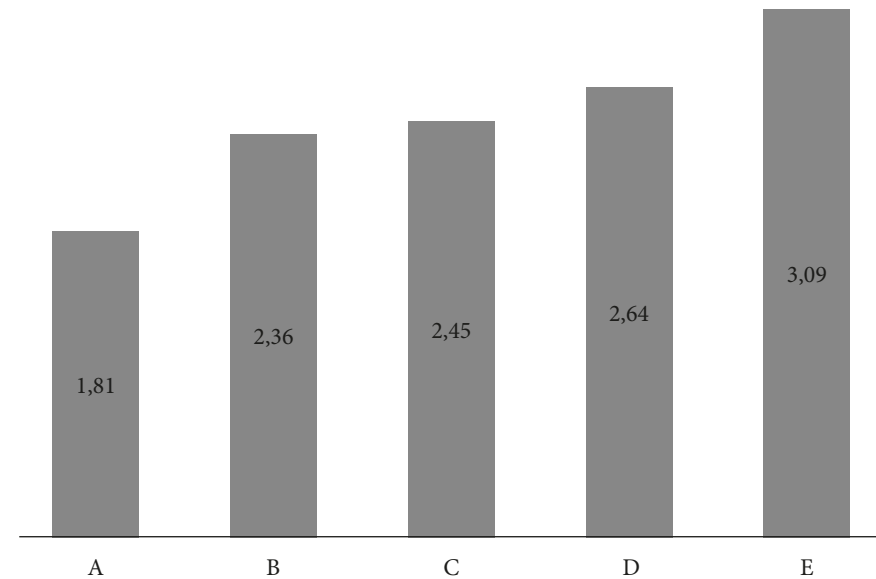


Fig. 3. Factors that determine the territorial cohesion of the Bavarian local action groups

Explanation: A – application of political pressure; B – local identity; C – administrative boundaries; D – landscape boundaries (geography); E – economic coherence

Source: Own research

This statement raises significant concerns regarding the role of the LEADER programme and puts long-term sustainable development of the regions at risk. The next, but minor factor is the existence of local identity and it has roughly the same weight as the dependence of administrative structure. The geographical borders which represent both a natural and social geographical confine were marked as less important among the conditions which ensure the cohesion, what contradicts the LEADER principles.

6. Launching of the Hungarian Pilot Programme LEADER in Hungary, or the Hungarian LEADER I programme, particularly in the North-Hungarian Region

In 2001 the Department of Rural Development Programmes intended to spend the remaining SAPARD money to create LEADER development programmes. SAPARD (Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural

Development), a pre-accession fund, was created to promote common agricultural policy for candidate countries. One of the most important prerequisites for the acquisition of resources was the creation of a Rural Development Plan for that period identifying the main priorities for improvement (Kozma, 2003). This methodology is intended to promote the LEADER programme in smaller territorial units fitted into a local context.

The programme is considered to be pioneering since it was the first that tried to prepare the accession countries for domestic application of integrated rural development (Fazekas, Nemes, 2005). This conclusion, however, is not entirely appropriate since the SAPARD development plans also tried to work with integrated multi-sector partners (Madarász, 2000). The basic goal of the programme was preparing for the LEADER+ Community Initiative, so that all levels of government and stakeholders acquired the relevant practical knowledge in the programme. Many LEADER areas do not form an administratively homogenous unit apart, of course, from urban areas that can lodge into the area of the local action groups, if it cannot be otherwise. Cities may not be LEADER

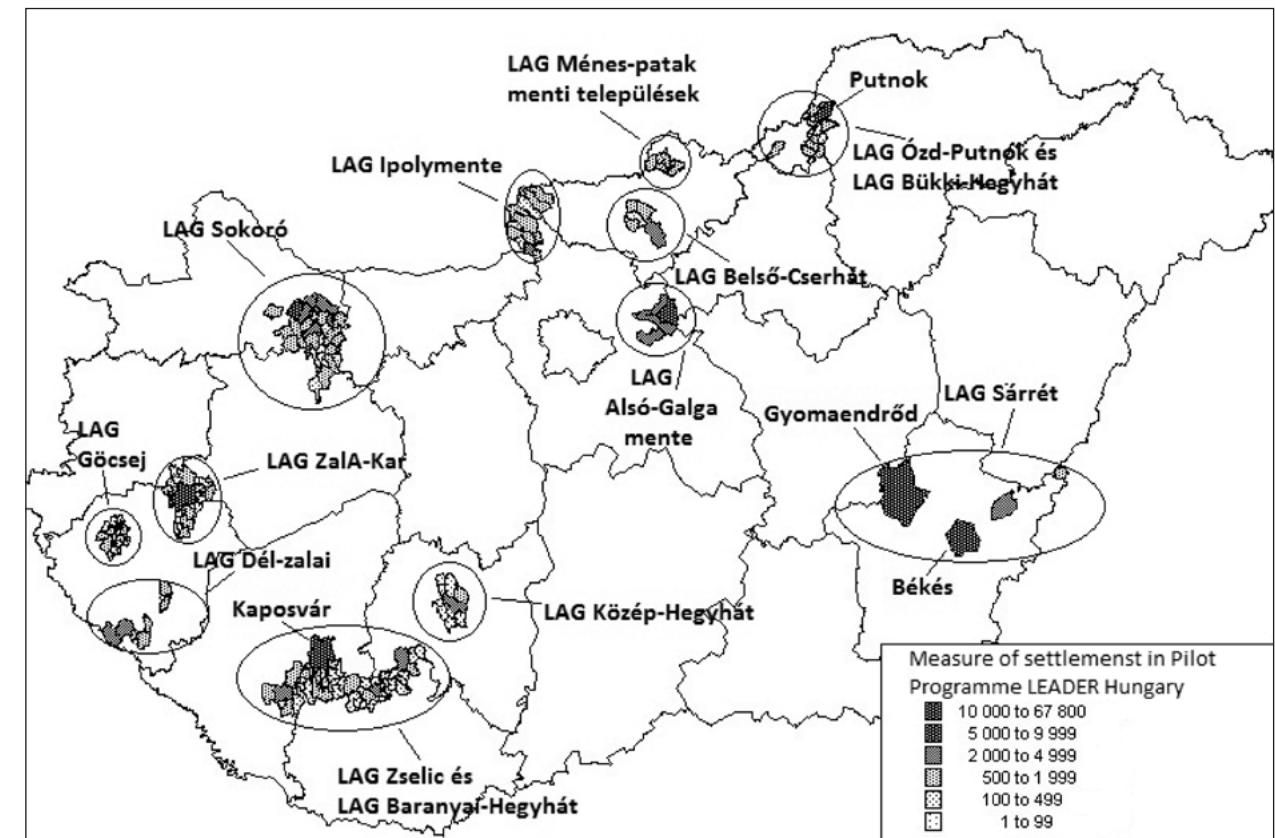


Fig. 4. Categories of Pilot LEADER territories in Hungary 2001–2004

Source: <http://www.fvm.hu/main.php?folderID=908&articleID=3859&ctag=articlelist&iid=1>

beneficiaries, not to mention middle cities, although there are numerous examples in our country (e.g.: Békés, Gyomaendrőd, Kaposvár, Putnok). Territorial units did not exist in Ózd-Putnok Rural Development Working Group, Dél-Zalai Rural Development Working Group or Sárrét Helyi Rural Development Working Group (Fig. 4).

According to the LEADER principles the selection of local action groups should not be implemented by ministries (FVM). Here one of the main LEADER principles suffered: the bottom-up approach. The situation therefore predetermined local unsustainability of rural development plans: regions did not participate either in the stage of implementation – LEADER+ – or in other community development programmes (see Table 2).

Other disadvantages of the Pilot LEADER Programme include: (a) excessive and pointless bureaucracy, which discouraged the involved civilians from further cooperation (see Fig. 3); (b) through

post-financing, the implementation of projects was often difficult, especially if the beneficiary was a civil organisation; (c) payments were delayed from the summer of 2002 until the beginning of 2004, so local participants could not receive back the money they invested in the projects, if they started at all; (d) ex-post evaluation of the Pilot LEADER programme is not available; (e) programme manual necessary for proper conduct was not finalised in time; for a long time it was not possible to know exactly how much money was available, what caused continuous uncertainty; (f) the change of government caused difficulty in the programme, and in the meantime the SAPARD programme started, which limited the sources; (g) the average 30–35 million HUF subsidisation was not sufficient to support major improvements (e.g.: creating situation analysis and development strategy, reviving local products and helping their market access by building effectively managing agent organisations

Table 2. Working groups of the Pilot LEADER programme, their settlements and their participation in the LEADER+ programme

A	B	C
Belső-Cserhát Local Rural Development Working Group	Buják	no
	Cserhátsurány	no
	Herencsény	no
	Szanda	no
	Terény	no
Bükk Hegyhát Local Rural Development Working Group	Borsodbóta	no
	Csokvaomány	no
	Lénárdaróc	no
	Nekézseny	no
	Sajómercse	no
	Sajónémeti	no
	Sajóvelezd	no
	Sáta	no
	Uppony	no
	Settlements of the Ménes-patak menti Local Rural Development Working Group	Endrefalva
Karancsság		no
Ludányhalászi		no
Piliny		no
Szalmatercs		no
Szécsényfelfalu		no
Ózd-Putnok Local Rural Development Working Group	Arló	no
	Bánréve	no
	Borsodszentgyörgy	no
	Királd	no
	Putnok	no
	Serényfalva	no

Explanation: A – name of the working group; B – settlements; C – participation in the LEADER + program (yes/no)

Source of data: www.fvm.hu DoA: 01/04/2010

and effective community partnerships, etc.); (h) the programme was quite a complex institutional system, which made it significantly more difficult for the beneficiaries to acquire resources (see Fig. 5); (i) the difficulties mentioned above discouraged the participants of the LEADER programme (eg.: BAZ County Public Educational Institution left the programme: as stated in Riz Gabor's letter sent to the Programme Director, 'Such behaviour of the Hungarian State Treasury shows how domestic civil society can be discredited and its harsh anti-social activities are also essentially illegal'. Of course, the programme director was not blamed for the difficulties and the Institute thanked for the kind assistance.

Implementation of the programme also rendered tangible results such as building a cooperation

network of 12 local working groups which worked according to the European model of local action groups with more or less success. The local action groups could compile locally initiated development plans and if these development plans were carefully designed it increased the chances of the region to participate in the following LEADER programmes (e.g. the 'Ipolymente healthy sub-region' programme, the 'Local value' programme of the Zala-KAR local working group). The persistence and quality work of the local action groups led to the following positive results: (a) developing local partnership with 3 sectors (civil, public, private); (b) the concept of subsidiarity acquired practical value; (c) despite minimal resources some significant developments were realised; (d) most importantly, the concept of local value was grounded

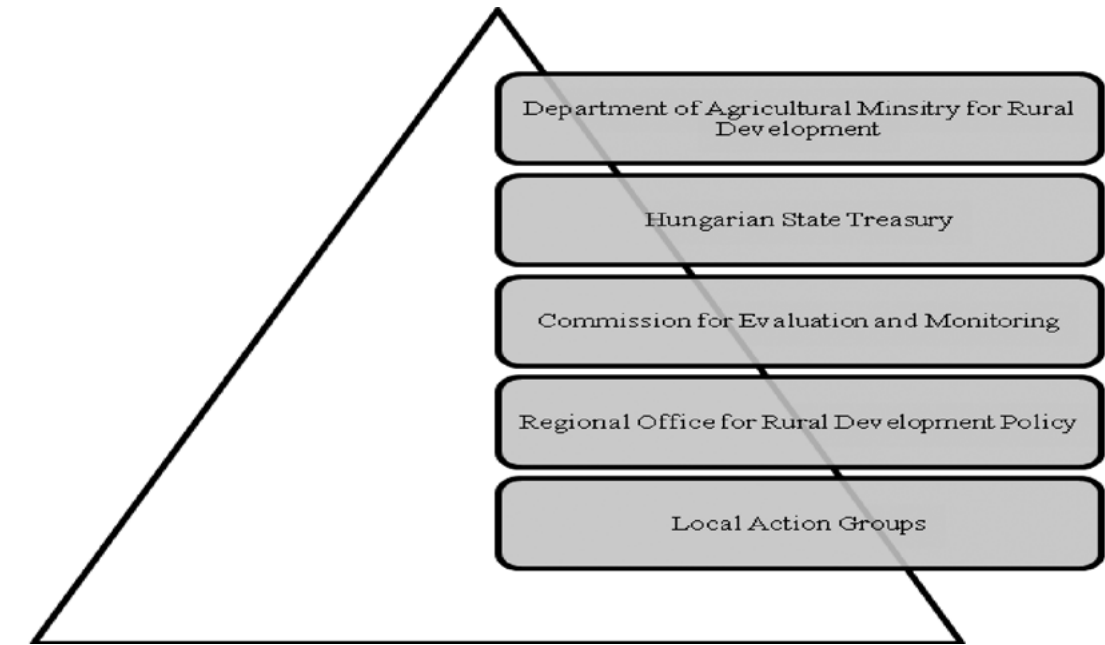


Fig. 5. The institutions of LEADER I in Hungary

Source: Promei Foundation, www.fvm.hu

(appreciation of sub-regional socio-economic sub-systems); (e) it is required for local governments to define the joint development together (most small settlements do not have local development strategy).

7. Results of the Pilot LEADER programme in the North-Hungarian Region (Hungarian Pilot Programme LEADER)

The North-Hungarian Pilot LEADER programme made little noticeable impact on the beneficiary areas. The poor result was due to three things: disorganisation of area selection and management; the availability of scarce resources and late payments; and development strategies with no real added value. Payments were strongly affected by the change of government in 2002, and ex-post evaluation was not made for this region.

The population of the selected cities in many cases did not meet the criteria set by the EU. Population should have reached 100 km² per capita density barrier, or of at least 10,000 inhabitants.

The overall low population and the prevention of the continuation of the LEADER + essentially question the real purpose of the Pilot LEADER Programme.

Of course, the domestic programme had positive results as well. The designated area that was selected was one of Hungary's most disadvantaged regions, in principle, money went into a good place. The Ménes-patak menti and the Belső-Cserhát Local Action Group emphasised the importance of preparation for LEADER+. These two local action groups had high-quality regional identity and landscape development concepts and implemented projects (Table 3).

Unfortunately, a number of investments of the two local action groups lost their meaning due to the prevention of the continuation of the programme because in many cases investments were created in the LEADER+ period with channelled additional funds. Examples include: the Ménes-patak menti Local Action Groups' farm model, the establishment of regional information centers, Roma craftsmen incubation workshop, or the creation of Information and Communication Centre by the Belső-Cserhát Local Action Group. Acquiring regional market and cross-border co-operation is

Table 3. Features the Pilot LEADER areas in the North-Hungarian Region

Name of LAG (Pilot Program LEADER)	Piedmont of Bükk Mountains	Ménés Creek	Internal Cserhát Mountains	Towns of Ózd and Putnok
Population (2001)	6,852	5,681	5,325	15,438
Area in km ²	113.29	87.66	153.86	137.3
Density of population	47	65	35	112
Number of settlements	9	6	5	6
Organisation form	Association	Association	Deposit company	Cultural Institute
Subsidy (€)	~ 100,000	~ 100,000	~ 100,000	~100,000
Flagship theme in the development strategy	Regeneration of the Hungarian 'Semmering Land	Reformation of the style of living in the Region of Ménés Creek	Valuable life in Internal Cserhát Mountains	Regional actions to develop local community
Comments	Realisation of small projects to develop local facilities in field of nature and landscape value	The LAG did a very useful and complex Program. The goal was to increase value of local agricultural products	A couple of tourism projects were established to improve youth tourism in the region. Population number was low, although this area has a lot of small settlements	Realised projects did not fit the development strategy of the region. Density of population was too high for the category of a rural area
Innovation value	low	high	high	low

Source: <http://www.fvm.hu/main.php?folderID=908&articleID=3859&ctag=articlelist&iid=1>, <https://teir.vati.hu/>

essential for the development of the farm models and also for the Roma craftsmen's projects because without them there is no guarantee of long-term operation. So the directions were good, the problems were not due to national policy.

However, the Bükki-Hegyhát and Ózd-Putnok Local Action Groups created a number of investments that were highly questionable during the time of implementation. The projects were fragmented basic infrastructure developments. The Ózd-Putnok local Action Group inserted the LEADER management into an existing institution of completely different use which raised serious concerns.

Results of the Pilot LEADER programme did not serve the organic evolution of the selected villages and even today all Local Action Groups belong to other LEADER regions, so both in space and time the effect and efficiency of the Pilot LEADER programme missed the targets contained in Community legislation. As a consequence, the Pilot LEADER Programme did not take into

account the fact that selected areas continue to thrive in new funding cycles and successfully overcome adverse situations arising from acute problems. Uncontrolled bureaucracy and unpredictable financial performance worsened the overall domestic picture of the LEADER programme.

8. Conclusion

LEADER I Programme of the European Community was a milestone in the foundation of a new approach to regional development and in the redefinition of Europe's rural areas. Since Hungary has only been a full member of the EU since 2004, the Pilot LEADER programme should not be considered as a complete community development intervention, even if it is about the transfer of the SAPARD pre-accession funds. Hungary's government noticed the LEADER rural development methodology as a potential new approach and

tried to plant the approach in the national regional development practice before joining the EU but unfortunately only with modest success. The main reason is that the programming sometimes ignored the European methodology, and the exiguous subsidisation and its many years of delay.

Of course, implementation was not smooth in the case of the old Member States as well, and the differences in national statistical sampling often beclouded the actual results. The unquestionable success of the programme is the planting of the local development strategies at community and domestic level and the creation of territorial demarcation, which can be integrated in later LEADER programmes and rural micro-regions.

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