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Contributions for the quality of life through a participative approach for rural development – Experiences from Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Eastern Germany)

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Abstract

The challenges for the quality of life in rural areas in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, connected with structural economic and demographic changes, raise the question of how to find appropriate policy interventions in the specific situation of transition countries.

One approach to bring forward rural development is LEADER, a locally managed, place-based form of policy intervention. LEADER is bottom-up oriented and participatory with own regional budgets to fund projects. There are 13 LEADER-regions in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern.

To discuss the question of appropriate policy interventions, experiences in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern will be considered and a comparison with the LEADER-experiences in western Germany will be made. Therefore, the findings of the evaluation of Rural Development Programs (RDPs) in six federal states in Germany will be used to examine the performance of the LEADER-approach.

In general a survey of LAG-members shows positive results regarding the performance of LEADER with no major discrepancies between Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and western Germany, but there are differences in participation structures (less working groups, but a higher share of female LAG-members in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern than in western Germany) and the role of the state sector. Problems for funding innovative projects were common, especially at the beginning of the funding period.

To use the original and intended strengths of the LEADER approach, greater freedom for the Local Actions Groups (LAG) would be required (also in the European policy framework).

Keywords:

LEADER, rural development, participation, quality of life, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern

1 Motivation and Research Questions

In rural areas in eastern Germany there are ongoing societal transformations, connected with the post-socialist transition and demographic change.

A major challenge, especially in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, is the population decline and aging population in many rural areas. A further reduction of the population is expected in most regions for the future. This reinforces economic problems and threatens the long-term provision of local services of general interest, which are crucial for the quality of life in rural areas (Grieve et al. 2011). Long-term strategies are required for adaptations to these present and future challenges.

Against the background of general structural changes, the diversification of rural employment is another key issue for rural livelihoods in transition (Möllers et al. 2011). In Mecklenburg-Vorpommern tourism is seen as an important opportunity in this context.

Thereby the commitment and creativity of the local residents are crucial strategic success factors (Pollermann 2006) and play an important role for the development and viability of rural areas. To discuss strategies for the support of rural areas in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, we have to take historical patterns like a tradition of a top-down provision of services of general interest in to account, as well as a top-down tradition in policy-making, with fewer possibilities for political participation before 1989.

So a major issue is to find appropriate policy interventions in this specific situation of transition countries. One approach to bring forward rural development is the support of Local Actions Groups (LAG). Those groups collaborate on the basis of an integrated local development strategy for their rural area. An important field of action in most regions is the quality of life (in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern especially basic services and recreation). For such action there is financial support from the European Agricultural Fund: the LEADER-approach.

LEADER is a bottom-up oriented, participatory approach in rural areas. Organisational structures with own budgets are established in every LEADER-region (there are 13 LEADER-Regions in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern). Different stakeholders come together in a Local Action Group as a kind of a public-private partnership and make decisions about the financial support for projects. These collaborations deal mainly with tourism, diversification of rural economy, demographic change and quality of life (Pollermann et al. 2012; more experiences with LEADER in transitions countries: Poland (Falkowski 2013); Lithuania (Macken-Walsh & Curtin 2012); Hungary (Katona-Kovács et al. 2011)).

A general assumption for LEADER is that there is an added value because of a better identification of local needs and solutions, more commitment of stakeholders and a greater scope for innovation. Further benefits are the pooling of endogenous resources, networking to allow mutual learning and an integrated approach to address complex economic and social issues (High & Nemes 2007).

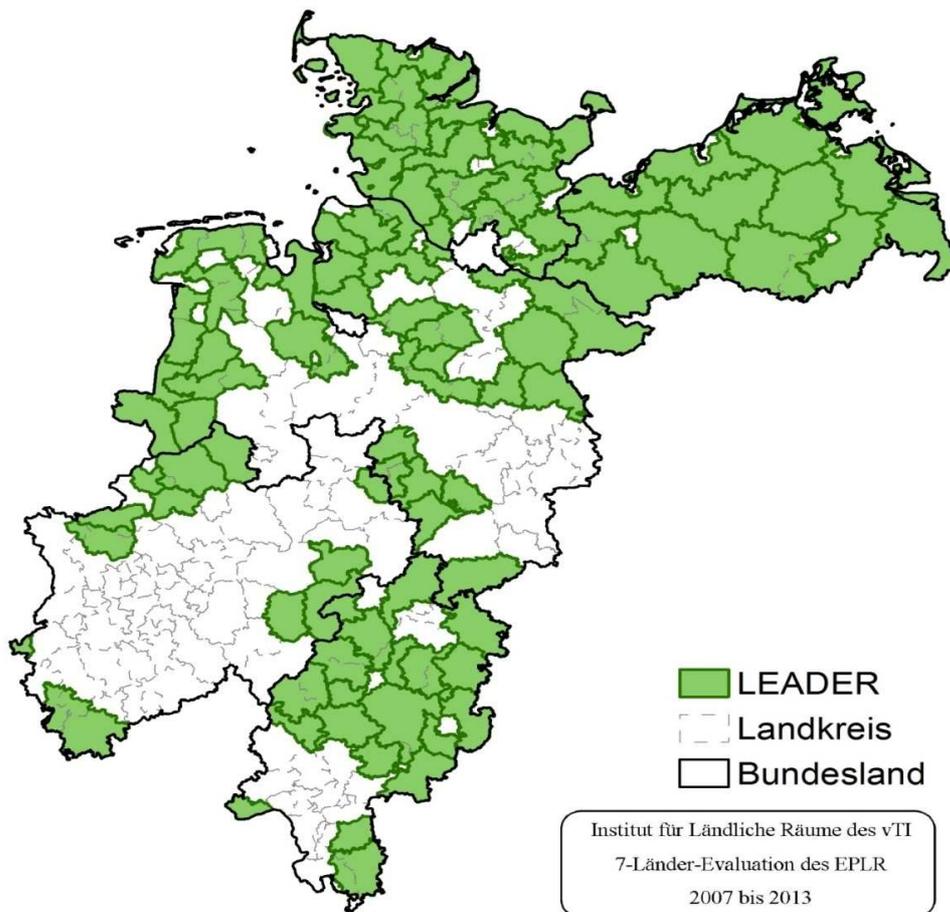
The main research question for the paper presentation is: Which role can a funding structure like LEADER (as a bottom up orientated policy intervention) play to improve the quality of life in rural areas in the context of the specific historical patterns in eastern Germany?

2 Data and Methods

To answer this question experiences in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern will be considered and a comparison with the LEADER-experiences in western Germany will be made. Therefore, the findings of the evaluation of Rural Development Programs (RDPs) in six federal states in Germany will be used to examine the performance of the LEADER-approach.

A mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods will be used with the following main instruments (see also Pollermann et al. 2013):

- I) More than 100 face-to-face interviews with project initiators, LAG managers, LAG members, and government employees at different levels of responsibility;
- II) Four surveys using written questionnaires: two for members of the LAG's decision bodies (in the years 2009 and 2013), one for LAG managers (2010) and another for project beneficiaries (2012)
- III) Standardised annual requests of activities and organisational structures in the LEADER areas and
- IV) An analysis of funding documents and funding data.



Map 1: Overview: all seven “Länder” (Bundesland) of the evaluation-project. Mecklenburg-Vorpommern with 13 LEADER-regions is in the North-east

3 Main results

In general the survey of LAG-members shows positive results regarding the performance of LEADER (see Figure 1) with no major differences between Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and western Germany. There are improvements in the “cooperation beyond administrative borders” (respectively narrow village boundaries), in “understanding views from other groups” and the „cooperation between different groups”. Thus LEADER is an example of how an external programme can connect actors from different interest groups, who, without this programme, would otherwise not have met.

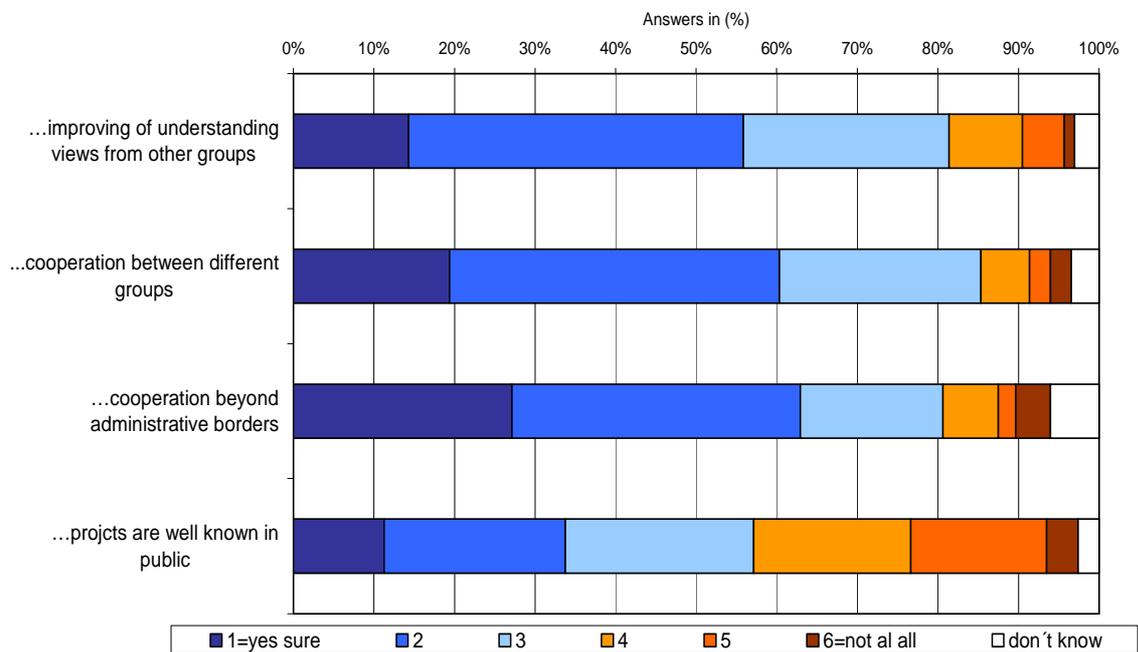


Figure 1: Estimations about the impact of LEADER (source: own data, LAG-member-survey).

In using a participative approach like LEADER many similarities are seen between eastern and western Germany, although in western Germany many more persons are involved in working and project groups (see Figure 2). In Mecklenburg-Vorpommern the percentage of female LAG-members is much higher than the average in the federal states examined in western Germany (see Figure 3).

Altogether the local authorities and the state sector play a stronger role in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (for example as project beneficiaries).

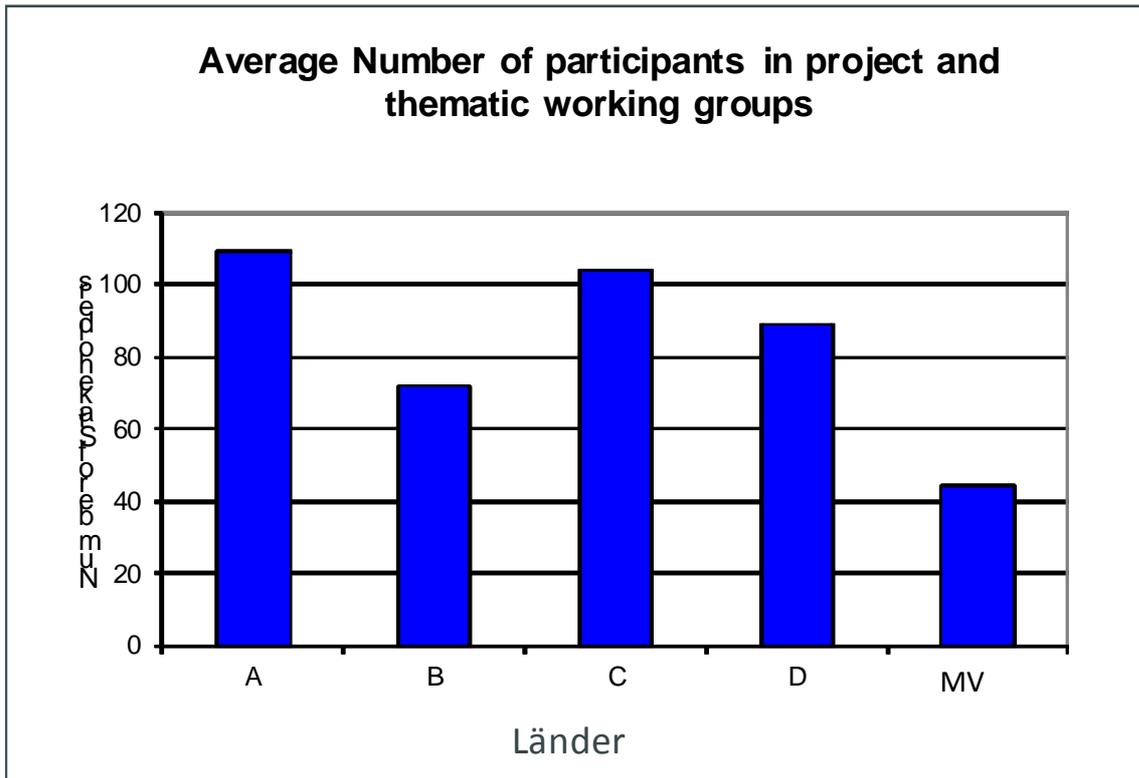


Figure 2: Average Number of in working and project groups involved persons per LAG (MV=Mecklenburg-Vorpommern; A, B, C, D: western Länder) (source: own data, annual requests 2012)

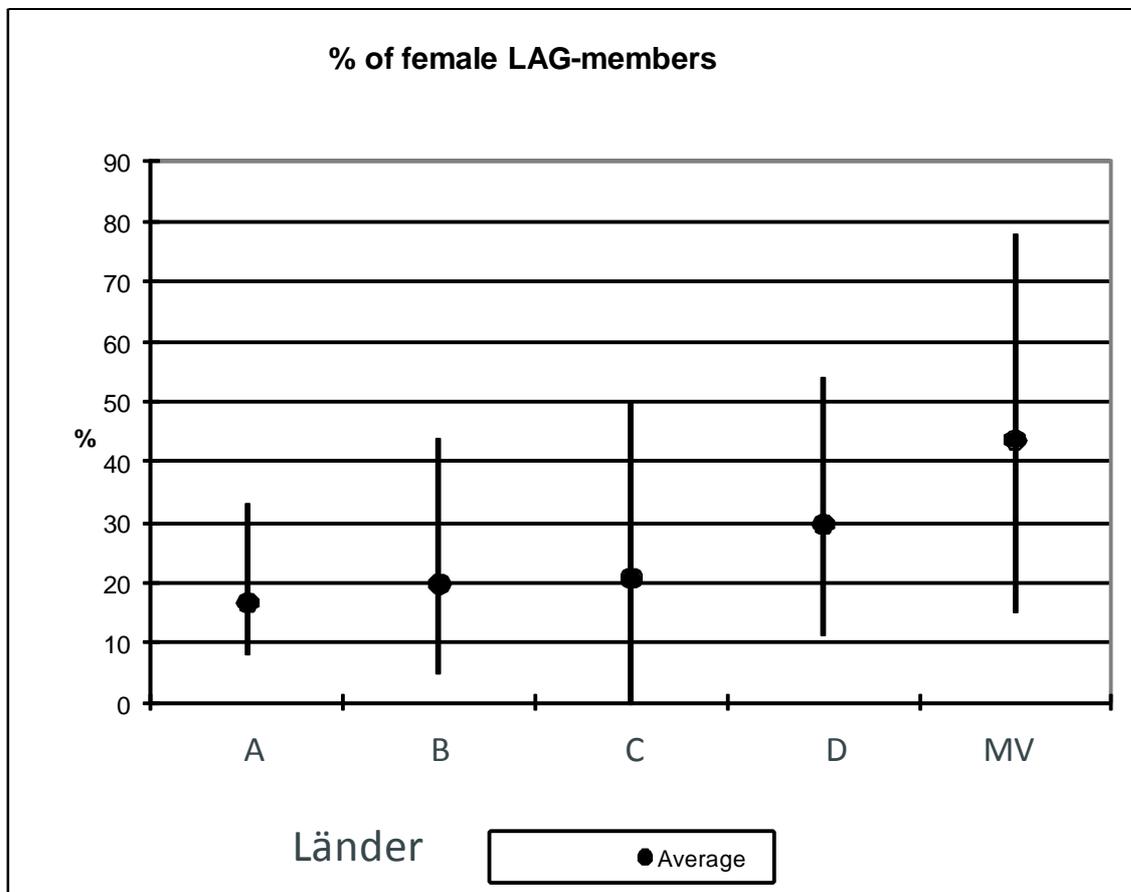


Figure 3: Range and Average % of female LAG-members (MV=Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, A, B, C, D: western Länder) (source: own data, annual requests 2012)

To examine the contributions of LEADER in the context of quality of life, there will also be a presentation of the results from the surveys with beneficiaries to discuss the added value in the sense of a higher mobilisation of endogenous resources. We will present a comparison from LEADER-projects with similar non-LEADER-projects. In this examination we will look in particular at the engagement of volunteers and other contributions from local actors.

For the development of creative solutions and new ideas it is advantageous when no narrow administrative limitations apply to the kinds of projects. The possibility of funding experimental or innovative projects via LEADER depends very much on the extent to which the RDPs are able to give a suitable framework to fund projects outside the standard menu of measures (Schnaut et al. 2012). So, in theory, innovation plays an important part in LEADER, but in practice it is limited. This assumption is underpinned by the results of the survey of LAG-managers (see Figure 4), who also noticed a deterioration in comparison with the possibilities of the previous funding period (LEADER+). Thereby, already in the year 2010 the conditions in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern were not worse than in other federal states, bad conditions for innovation have been no “transitions country specific problem”. To address these problems with the funding of innovation, some federal states in Germany already made improvements within this funding period (and hopefully more innovation will be possible in the next funding period.)

For example the federal state Mecklenburg-Vorpommern now provides an own measure called LEADERalternativ (Reimann & Kleinfeld 2012).

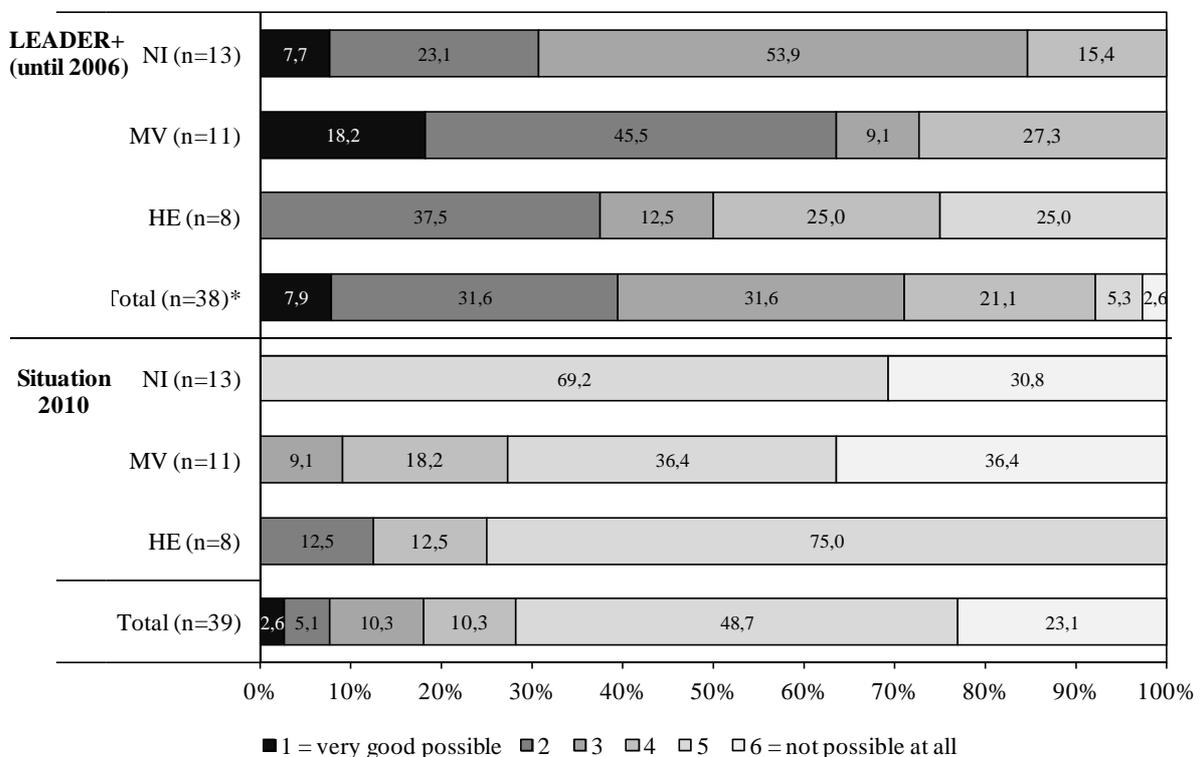


Figure 4: Distribution of answers (in percentage of total) to the question ‘How do you judge the possibilities to fund innovative projects?’ (source: own data, survey of LAG-managers 2010)

* Data for Nordrhein-Westfalen and Schleswig-Holstein are included in the total but are not shown separately because of the small size of the subgroups / [NI=Lower-Saxony; MV=Mecklenburg-Vorpommern; HE=Hesse]

To use the original and intended strengths of the LEADER approach, greater freedom for locally devised and managed, place-based forms of intervention would be required (Copus et al., 2011, ELARD 2012), but this is clearly not only a problem in Eastern Germany, but in Western Germany as well (see also the examinations in Austria and Ireland from Dax et al. (2013)).

After the problems at the start of the programme, the improvements (regarding innovation) made in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern during the current funding period are a good sign.

As LEADER depends on the willingness and high engagement of the local actors, it would be beneficial if the initial phase would already give motivation for further actions to foster the quality of life. But altogether one should keep in mind that a small funding scheme like LEADER alone can't really solve problems caused by the ongoing demographic change.

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