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Conference Paper — Published Version

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Suggested Citation: Pollermann, Kim; Fynn, Lynn-Livia (2021) : Place-based and participative approaches: reflections for policy design in rural development, In: Proceedings 13th World Congress of the RSAI: Smart Regions - Opportunities for sustainable development in the digital era, virtual conference May 25-28, 2021, ISBN 978-989-54216-1-9, Regional Science Association International, Angra do Heroísmo, Azores, Portugal, pp. 946-949,
[https://www.regionalscience.org/images/PDF/
PROCEEDINGS_2021RSAICongress_V16_07.pdf](https://www.regionalscience.org/images/PDF/PROCEEDINGS_2021RSAICongress_V16_07.pdf)

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Place-based and participative approaches: reflections for policy design in rural development

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ABSTRACT

Across the European Union, the so-called “Community-Led Local Development” (CLLD) is a well-established policy instrument. It began with LEADER in rural areas over 30 years ago and now comprises over 3000 Local Action Groups (LAGs) across the continent. LEADER is a place-based and participatory approach where a Local Action Group composed of stakeholders from local government, civil society and economy steers the implementation of its local development strategy. LAGs each have a budget at their disposal to support project implementation within the EU funding period (time for implementation is around five years). A set of LEADER principles describes the characteristics of LEADER: territorial approach, bottom-up, public-private partnerships, integrated and multi-sectoral approach, innovation, cooperation with other regions and networking.

The aim of this contribution is to discuss different possibilities for policy design of LEADER implementation regarding different steering options. To examine the performance of LEADER, we utilise results from the 2014-2020 funding period, specifically data from 115 LAGs from four federal states in Germany. Main material was collected by three surveys using written questionnaires (mainly executed as online surveys: LAG member survey n=1999, LAG management survey n=114, survey of beneficiaries: n=1079).

The results are related to single variables of LEADER implementation and their impact on the performance of LEADER. Due to complex relations of different aspects, we mainly elaborate findings on simplified output indicators.

Regarding a suitable policy design, the results offer several insights: in the context of spatial delimitation, results show that a suitable region design/delimitation is not dependent on the population size of the various LEADER regions.

To foster a higher share of innovative projects, it is adjuvant to establish a suitable staff capacity in LAG managements. This supports a policy recommendation to predefine minimum targets for staff capacity as a prior condition for funding the LAGs, as this shows be an important factor to support innovation and participation of local actors.

Keywords: *Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), LEADER, participation, place-based*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Place-based and participative approaches in rural development

The EU is characterised by enduring regional inequalities, brought about partly by successive enlargements, due to lower income countries acceding to membership, but also because of enduring structural problems in some Western European regions (Tomaney 2010). Regarding rural development, there are different challenges in European regions. To deliver assistance for rural areas, different policies from the European Union as well as from national states try to support declining regions in particular. But what is needed in the design and implementation of these policies for them to effectively contribute to regional development? According to Castro-Arce & Vanclay (2020) sharing of power and participatory decision-making could facilitate more flexible, inclusive and effective solutions and planning towards regional transformation. This calls for long-term strategies for adaptations to present and future challenges of these areas. Thus, the commitment of the local actors is a crucial strategic success factor for planning processes (Pollermann 2014).

In recent decades, rural development policy made a substantial shift from a sectoral top-down approach to a territorial and integrated approach, which aims to include a variety of sectors relevant for rural development and a variety of government levels and stakeholders (Moseley 2003; Pollermann et al. 2014).

Such territorial or place-based development policies partially emerged in response to perceived failures of earlier regional policies. Their focus now lies on unfolding economic potential and reducing social exclusion of underdeveloped regions by improving access to integrated goods and services tailored to the needs of the local communities (Tomaney 2010).

In the European Union, the so-called “Community-Led Local Development” (CLLD) is an example of such a policy instrument which arose out of a community initiative for rural development called LEADER over 30 years ago. The word LEADER is an acronym derived from the French language: “Liaisons Entre Actions de Développement de l’Economie Rurale” = Links between actions for the development of the rural economy.

Participation of local stakeholders in regional development processes is another crucial element of such policies. Different experiences show that revitalisation succeeds when bottom-up initiatives of local stakeholders work with assistance and support by government (Li et al. 2016, 511f). The study also shows the importance of shared values and strong leadership in fostering collaboration in the pursuit of a common goal. Thus, it must not only

be acknowledged that cooperation is relevant for local development – considerations on how to effectively animate local stakeholders to participate and be drivers of transformation processes are also of relevance. The role of facilitator of suitable and effective participation could be taken on by some kind of local management (with its own staff) as can be found in regions supported by means of the policy instrument LEADER.

1.2. Implementation of LEADER

To describe the characteristics of LEADER, there is a set of LEADER principles: territorial approach, bottom-up, public-private partnership, integrated and multi-sectoral approach, innovation, cooperation with other regions and networking (EC 2006; Thuesen & Nielsen 2014; Pollermann et al. 2020). A key element is a so-called Local Action Group (LAG) which is composed of stakeholders from local government, civil society and economy, and formed to steer the implementation of a Local Development Strategy (LDS). This contains a thorough description of the regional demographic, economic and natural situation, an analysis of strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats as well as selected development objectives for the various LEADER region¹. The LDS also addresses different parameters regarding the organization of the LAG, the selection of projects and the administration of funds, amongst others. The LAGs dispose of their own budgets to support project implementation (approx. 3 million euro in examined regions). The time period for implementation is around five years.

The LEADER instrument requires tailoring to a specific area, so the delimitation of the LEADER region is a crucial explanatory variable. In Germany, LEADER regions are often designed beyond the traditional administrative borders and their size usually varies from 30,000 to 150,000 inhabitants.

Another crucial aspect of the LEADER approach is the establishment of a LAG management, which promotes participation of different stakeholders: usually one to three staff members per LAG work on coordination, consulting services and public relations.

A main result of LEADER is the implementation of projects related to a range of topic areas including tourism, village development, basic services, mobility, education, culture and climate protection. Innovation is not a precondition for project funding although it is an essential aim of LEADER to create innovative projects in sense of new approaches to local development in the LEADER region.

¹ Sometimes referred to only as „region“ in this paper.

1.3. Research Question

The aim of this contribution is to discuss the influence of different variables of LEADER implementation on the performance of this place-based and participatory approach.

In doing so, we will focus on two aspects:

- **Delimitation of the LEADER region:** differences in suitability for rural development related to the size of the region, measured in number of inhabitants. Here, we use the opinions of LAG members as an indicator for the suitability of the delimitations.
- **Staff capacity of the LAG management:** implications of staff capacity (measured as the number of full-time equivalents) for the implementation of innovative projects.

Both aspects are important for the future policy design for LEADER since programme authorities may set guidelines and direct funding requirements with the aim of generating positive outcomes in local development in rural areas.

2. DATA & METHODS

To examine the performance of LEADER, we utilise results from the 2014-2022 funding period, especially structural data of 115 LAGs in four German federal states (“Bundesländer”). These constitute 24 LEADER regions in Hesse (HE), 41 in Lower-Saxony (NI), 28 in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), and 22 in Schleswig-Holstein (SH). Main data was collected by three surveys:

- LAG member survey: members of the LAGs’ decision-making bodies in all examined federal states in 2017/2018 (requested persons N=3308, responses n=1999, response rate: 60 %). Usually, a six-point Likert scale was used to classify personal estimations of the LAG members.
- LAG management survey: one manager per LAG was surveyed in 2018 (N=115, n=114, response rate 99 %) with a mixture of general questions about the situation in the region, open questions to grasp more detailed assessments about specific problems, again using Likert scales and open questions.
- Survey of beneficiaries: questions regarding LEADER projects (for the implementation of LDS, submeasure 19.2), (N=1267, n=1079, response rate: 85 %), the respondents were asked for estimations about project development, funding procedures and results of their project, again using Likert scales and open questions.

To judge the performance of LEADER, several output indicators are compiled (in connection with the LEADER principles and the related expected benefits).

3. RESULTS

This paper contains only preliminary results; more detailed deliverables will follow in the session and further publications. The results are related to single variables of the LEADER implementation and their impact on LEADER performance.

3.1. Place delimitation

Regarding place delimitation the federal states specify different limits for an eligible region size (NRW: 40.000 to 150.000 inhabitants (maximum 175.000); NI: 40.000 to 150.000; HE: 50.000 to 150.000; SH: 50.000 to 150.000).

Results show that a suitable region design is not dependent on the population size of the various LEADER regions when it comes to promoting regional development. The satisfaction of the LAG members surveyed is generally quite high with no significant differences based on population size, although a minor tendency of smaller regions to be rated more positively could be detected (see figure 1).

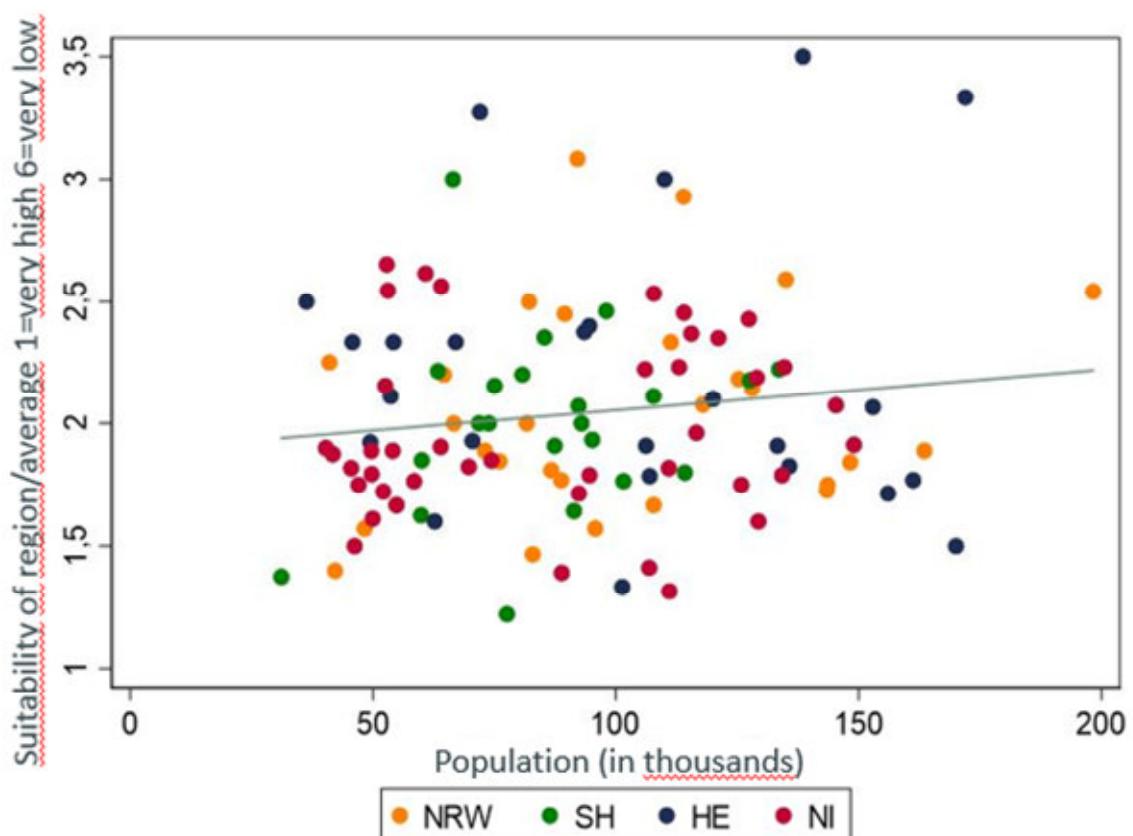


Figure 1: Size of region & opinions on size suitability (own illustration, n=115 regions)

3.2. The role of LAG management in promoting participation for innovative projects

Analyses of the structural data of the various LEADER regions show that working hours of LAG management teams in the four federal states vary on average between 40 and 62 hours per week. In some regions, weekly working hours fall below 36 or exceed 80 hours. Reasons for this variation are based on different regulations, set by the federal states for the approval/validation process of LAGs (see table 1).

Federal state ¹	HE	NI	NRW	SH
Regulation	Binding target: 1.5 full-time ² employees (=60 hours/week)	No binding or recommended target	Binding target: 1.5 full-time ² employees (=60 hours/week)	Recommendation: 2 full-time ² employees (=80 hours/week)
Results (2019)	62 h/week (2013: 62)	40 h/week (2013: 34) Often only 20 h	60 h/week (2013: 38)	56 h/week (2013: 51) Relatively high variance

¹ Hesse (HE), Lower Saxony (NI), North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), Schleswig-Holsten (SH)

² One full-time position corresponds to 40 working hours per week

Table 1: Implementation rules and staff capacity of LAG-managements

To analyse the different outputs of such variations in staff capacities, we examine the share of innovative projects since fostering innovation is an objective of LAGs. Regarding the incidence and kind of innovative projects the results are as follows: 56 % of the beneficiaries classified their own project as being innovative based on a definition of innovation provided in the questionnaire („ideas or approaches/strategies for action, that are new to your region“).

The nature of the innovation is also specified: 61 % of the respondents mentioned new products or services, 16 % technological processes, 39 % the exploration of new markets/customer groups and 42 % forms of cooperation or organisational aspects. A few examples of innovations mentioned by the respondents were the use of iPads in schools, organization of a poetry slam to engage the youth and an adventure trail for bike tourism. In addition to that, with respect to 33 % of the innovative projects, the beneficiaries reported interested persons reaching out to make enquiries about their projects.

Looking at the influence of the staff capacity of LAG managements (number of weekly hours) there is a positive correlation between capacity and share of innovative projects (see figure 2). Thus, preliminary results indicate that the existence of a well-equipped LAG management team contributes to innovative approaches in project development.

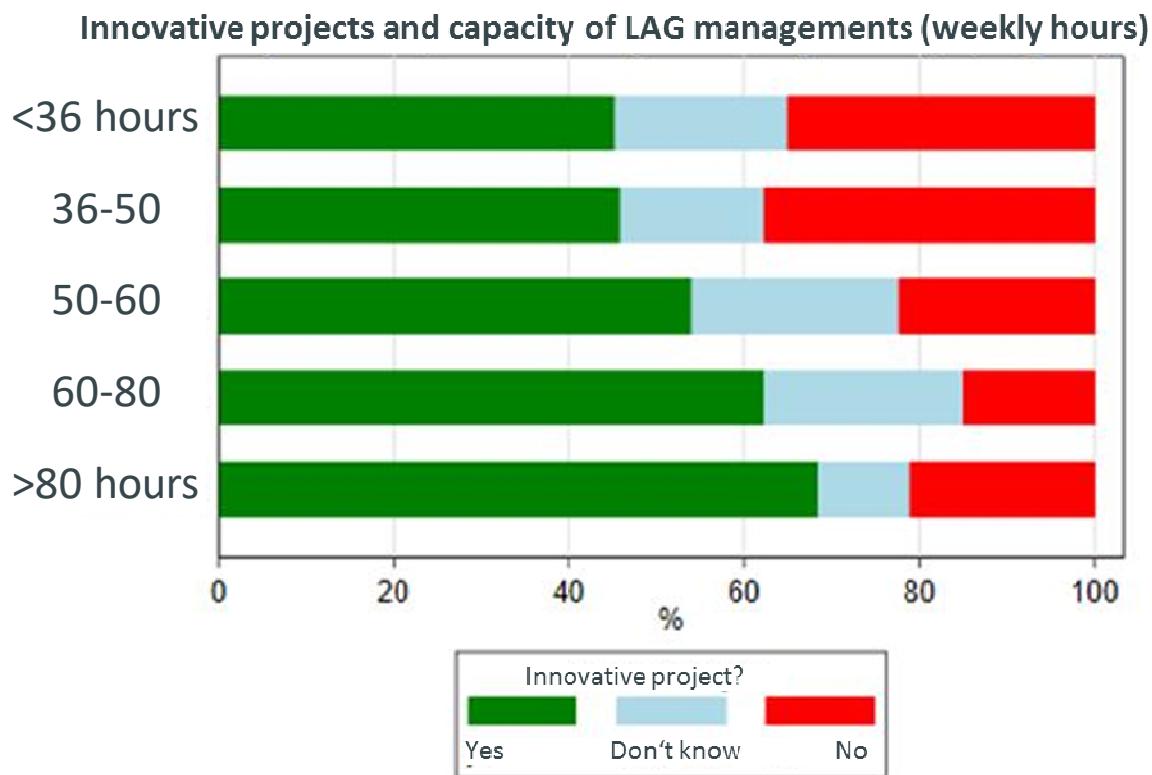


Figure 2: Staff capacity & share of innovative projects (own illustration, n=115 regions)

4. CONCLUSION

The LEADER instrument requires tailoring to a specific area. Our results, however, indicate that for place delimitation, the LAGs should have a wide range of freedom in this decision. Suitable delimitation is more dependent on local specificities such as administrative or natural boundaries or certain requirements in connection with the objectives of the local development strategies rather than the mere number of inhabitants.

The establishment of a LAG-management body is a prerequisite for all regions funded within LEADER. However, a lack of predefined targets often results in understaffing. One of the insights our results offer is that a higher staff capacity in LAG managements in the different LEADER regions fosters a higher share of innovative projects. This supports a policy recommendation to predefine minimum targets for staff capacity as a prior condition for funding the LAGs. A suitable minimum could be 60 hours which brings with it the extra benefit of a minimum of two persons, thus enabling continuous functioning/availability of the LAG management and smooth transitions in the event of staff changes, provided only one of the LAG managers is affected.

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