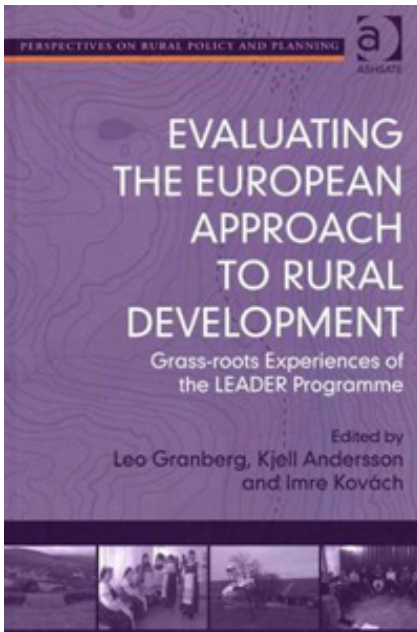


LEADER: RESULTS AND PROBLEMS AT LOCAL LEVEL



Leo Granberg, Kjell Anderson and Imre Kovách (editors):
Evaluating the European Approach to Rural Development:
Grass-roots Experiences of the LEADER Programme
Ashgate, 2015

The LEADER programme has been running for over 20 years and what makes it unique is that it applies the same development policies and methods in different countries, in different social contexts. Analysis of the experiences and local practices raises a lot of interesting and important questions related to the effectiveness and the impact of the LEADER programme in rural development and questions that researchers, programmes, professional and institutional actors of rural development are interested in.

In April 2015 Ashgate Publishing published the new volume of the series *Perspectives on Rural Policy and Planning*, entitled *Evaluating the European Approach to Rural Development*, written for each actor of rural development. In this book recognized social researchers, sociologists and rural development professionals discuss the current results and problems of the LEADER programme at the local level in a unique approach, through their research. The main objective of the book edited by Leo Granberg, Kjell Anderson and Imre Kovách is to examine whether the LEADER programme strengthens local democracy or not and how it affects the power balance between national and local actors and between genders. An important objective is to examine the structure and functioning of local action groups. A further issue is to ask whether LEADER projects are indeed grass-root level activities, reflecting local needs and ideals, or if they represent something else.

The 235-page book is divided into thirteen chapters. Except for the introduction and summary chapter, each study paper analyses the functioning of LEADER based on the experiences from a country or a region. This approach is useful and interesting for any researcher and layman interested in the functioning of society.

In the first, introductory, part entitled *Leader as an Experiment in Grass-Roots Democracy*, the editors present the theme and aim of this book, the specificities of LEADER, and the questions to be discussed highlighting numerous examples from the studies. According to the authors the LEADER approach has changed the old local power structures in rural development and a new 'project-class' has taken over the dominant role of farmers and their organizations which devalues the bottom-up character of the approach. However the EU guidelines prescribe the participation of women, agricultural producers and young people, in many cases these groups are left out of the development processes. In this view the LEADER approach cannot be successful enough.

In the study titled *LEADER and Local Democracy: A Comparison between Finland and the United Kingdom* Johan Munck of Rosenschöld and Johanna Löyhko discuss the democratic features of Local Action Groups (LAGs) and LEADER projects in Finland and the United Kingdom. The main conclusion of the study is that although the internal functioning of LAGs follows the integrative model of democracy, the LAGs are predominantly closed for external participation in both countries, indicating a major problem from the democratic point of view. This raises the question whether the internal openness of the LAGs is a result of the exclusion of external actors or if this is a result of the LEADER method itself. Another important conclusion is that the level of participation varies in different stages of the projects so the authors suggest further researches about the output of LEADER projects and their long-term democratic consequences.

The third study analyses the LEADER approach and LAGs through Spanish experiences of LEADER practices. Javier Esparcia, Jaime Escribano and Almudena Buciega highlights that, apart from certain weaknesses, the LEADER method and LAGs have become an instrument for the socio-economic development and participatory democracy in Spain. The study also expresses some suggestions to improve the effectiveness of LAGs. Study title: *A Perspective of LEADER Method in Spain Based on the Analysis of Local Action Groups*.

In the study titled *The LEADER Programme in Hungary – Bottom-up Development with Top-down Control?* Imre Kovách and Bernadett Csurgó discuss the characteristics of local democracy, power balance, bottom-up and top-down initiatives in three Hungarian regions through statistical data. After the authors present the implementation of LEADER and compare the three local models, they express some criticism of the political management and suggest new cooperation models. The three case studies give much evidence that LEADER practice does not meet European Union principles of grass-roots initiatives and local decisions. According to this, the system is over-bureaucratized, the LAGs mostly represent the model of aggregative democracy, and many important local actors are excluded from the development process. The authors argue that despite of this, the experiences of the LEADER-type development are not always negative, which could provide a basis for the advent of local democracy.

In the fifth chapter Annette Agaard Thuesen presents an overview of aggregative and integrative democratic theory through partnerships in Danish LEADER local action groups. According to the author the functioning of the LAGs points towards integrative democracy, because more and more citizens are involved in the decision-making processes. In addition, local experiences, national initiatives and guidelines may promote participatory democracy and LAGs can become important mediators between formal authorities and rural

citizens in rural governance. Study title: *The Democratic Capabilities of and Rhetoric on LEADER LAGs in the EU – The Danish Case.*

In Chapter 6 Marko Nousiainen analyses the political particularities of the Finnish LEADER. The author's insight is that the features of consensus and integration that characterize the internal LAG work in Finland are not natural borne but rather LEADER characteristics, which are introduced in practice by external actors in cooperation with dominant LAG members. Study title: *A Political Perspective on LEADER in Finland – Democracy and the Problem of 'Troublemakers'.*

The subject of the seventh part titled *LEADER and Possibilities of Local Development in the Russian Countryside* is an experimental research study, which was carried out in the vicinity of Lake Ladoga, North-Western Russia, in 2011–2013, in which local actors applied the LEADER method to support small-scale initiatives. The main question of this analysis made by Leo Granberg, Jouko Nikula and Inna Kopoteva is how this approach can be applied in rural Russia, in a region dominated by bureaucratic steering and local passivity.

Annette Aagaard Thuesen and Petra Derkzen in their study titled *Questioning the Gender Distribution in Danish LEADER LAGs* analyse and discuss the democratization of the entrance channels and the gender balance in Danish LAGs with rich statistical information.

In Chapter 9 (Title: *LEADER LAGs: Neocorporatist Local Regimes or Examples of Economic Democracy?*) Giorgio Osti points out that in Italy, despite positive examples, a significant part of the LAGs operates according to aggregative principles, and municipalities, organizations and 'vested interests' are competing for the LEADER resources, in which the territory is only a marketing device. The author also questions the dual model of aggregative and integrative democracy.

In Chapter 10 titled *Bottom-up Initiatives and Competing Interests in Transylvania* Dénes Kiss and Enikő Veress analyse the implementation process of the LEADER programme in Transylvania, Romania. Besides the presentation of socio-economic background the case study analyses the conflicts of interest that occur between political, interest and professional groups, between rural and urban population, as well as the conflicts of interest between ethnicities. The analysis focuses on the impact of macro-societal conflicts on rural development processes.

In Ildikó Asztalos Morell's study the Hungarian LEADER is discussed in a new approach using interview fragments: through a project targeting the Romani community this chapter analyses how different interests influence the targeting and realization of developmental goals aimed at improving the living conditions of marginalized groups, and whether and under which conditions the new model of governance can work at the local level, for the benefit of those with the least resources. Study title: *Can Renewable Energy Contribute to Poverty Reduction? A Case Study on Romafa, a Hungarian LEADER.*

In Chapter 12 Aude-Annabelle Canesse analyses determining development policies, developmental institutions and instruments in the last decades in Tunisia. Study title: *Developing or Creating Instability? Development Management, Scale and Representativeness in Tunisia.*

In the last chapter titled *Conclusion: The LEADER Colours on the Democracy Palette* the editors summarize the most important insights of case studies, the impact of LEADER on societies with democratic and authoritarian traditions.

The aim of this review is to briefly introduce the topics and unique approaches of studies published in the book about LEADER programme. Although the book forms a thematic unit, the studies related to the different regions discuss key issues of rural development in diverse and unique approaches. The studies are related by the new understanding of rural development, highlighting successful examples, and by indication of problems and deficiencies. Reading the book the commitment of social researchers, sociologists and rural development professionals can be felt, because they express opinions and suggestions in social, political and economic contexts.

Overall, the book is unique because it analyses the new rural development possibilities and problems of European countries in different contexts, at the international level. According to the summary of the editors, the LEADER programme could be recognized because it is still viable and growing, while most community initiatives have been forgotten since the 1990s. Furthermore, it has influenced the urban community too, and has resulted in initiatives that demonstrate the democratic properties of the method, promoting social and economic development.