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Implementation and impacts of the LEADER-approach – reflections on the intervention logic of a participatory approach for rural development

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One approach to support a smart rural development is LEADER, which is funded by the European agricultural fund. Organisational structures with own budgets for project funding are established in LEADER-regions to enable participation of local actors. There is a specific intervention logic, which bases on the following principles of the LEADER-approach: local partnerships with private and public actors, bottom up-orientation, territorial approach with a local development strategy, multi-sectoral conception, cooperation with other regions, innovation, networking/networks and a LAG-management for coordination.¹

A general assumption about LEADER is that the implementation of these principles creates 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 networking to allow mutual learning and an integrated approach to address complex economic and social issues. So the intervention logic assumes that a successful implementation of the principles of the LEADER-approach foster impacts on rural development.²

But because of the high complexity of the LEADER-issues (very different topics of rural development) and a lot of "soft impacts", like improving cooperation-attitudes, there are difficulties in measurement of the real results. So it is not easy to prove the achieved added value. Furthermore the European Court of Auditors claims in a special report (5/2010) about the "Implementation of the LEADER approach for rural development"³, that LAGs have implemented the LEADER approach in ways which limit the potential for added value. Thus there is a need for a critical review.⁴

To reflect the implementation and impacts of the LEADER-approach we can present results from the evaluation of Rural Development Programs (RDPs) in six federal states in Germany. Object of evaluation are more than 100 LEADER-regions. A mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods has been used (including more than 100 face-to-face interviews and four surveys using written questionnaires: two for members of the LAG's decision-making

¹ EU-Com (2006), Pollermann (2016)

² Dargan & Shucksmith (2008), Katona-Kovács et al (2011), Pollermann et al. (2014b), Wellbrock et al. (2012)

³ ECA (2010)

⁴ A review of international literature about LEADER is presented in: Pollermann et al. (2014a)

bodies, one for LAG managers and another one for project beneficiaries). This long-term research starting in 2007 and ending 2016.⁵

There are two questions: "Is the LEADER-approach really implemented according to the LEADER-principles" and "How do these elements have an impact on the success in supporting rural development?".

Regarding the implementation it can be summarized that putting LEADER-principles into practice was mainly successful. For example, there is wide participation of local stakeholders (although there is a clear dominance of the usual suspects of participation in such processes: male, academic, over 40); the LAG-management gets good marks from LAG-members as well as from beneficiaries, and the local development strategies include different sectors. Problems in implementation are: funding regulations (restricting the freedom of decision-making) and a lack of cooperative projects with other regions, especially at the beginning of the funding period.⁶

Regarding the impact on rural development, positive results refer to a good mobilisation of voluntary work in the LEADER-financed projects and a higher share of projects with a region-wide-focus (rather than just focusing on a single municipality).⁷ Finally we reflect outcomes of different modes of participation.

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⁵ Final reports with a summary in English at: www.eler-evaluierung.de

⁶ Pollermann et al. (2013)

⁷ Peter et al. (2016)

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