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Participation in rural development – the view of non-participants

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1. Introduction

The support for rural development with participatory approaches has a long tradition in EU funding programmes addressing the challenges of rural areas. One corresponding instrument is LEADER, which is a place-based, participatory approach aimed at bringing together public, private and civil society organisations (European Commission 2006, Pollermann 2016). Today it is funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) 2014-2020. Within LEADER, the different stakeholders come together in a Local Action Group (LAG) as a type of a public-private partnership which disposes of its own budgets (~3 Mio. €). These groups collaborate on the basis of an integrated local development strategy (LDS) and administer own budgets to support projects. LEADER is also viewed in the context of regional identities to foster a common “sense of place” which includes the mobilisation and commitment of local actors (Pollermann et al. 2013). Participation should be an instrument which offers better results as well as more legitimacy as compared to topdown politics. Different challenges of participation in the context of LEADER are known from literature: problems like dominance of the public sector, hindrance through bureaucracy or biased representation concerning gender, age or education. Such problems are different in varying member states across the EU (Thuesen 2010; Navarro et al. 2015; Shortall 2008). Although in Germany there are often broad participation opportunities within LEADER, some observations in literature are that only the “usual suspects” (age over 40, higher education, male) are involved in such participatory processes (Pollermann et al. 2014).

It is a well-established practice to ask the participants of such processes how they view cooperation within their various LEADER decision-making bodies in order to examine their satisfaction with decision-making procedures or their estimations about the output quality. However, for some research questions, an external view would be more appropriate. Thus, this contribution brings into focus the estimations of non-participants to examine their opinions about possibilities for participation or the legitimacy of decision-making within LEADER processes.

2. Methods & material

The presentation elaborates insights from an external view on participation. This approach can prove to be beneficial for examining more appropriate possibilities for participation or means of legitimising/justifying decision-making within LEADER.

Important questions within this research approach are: how to define “non-participants”? Where we will find them? If they are not participating, do they have enough knowledge to answer similar questions to those of participants? What must be taken into consideration to allow for a comparison with LAG-members?

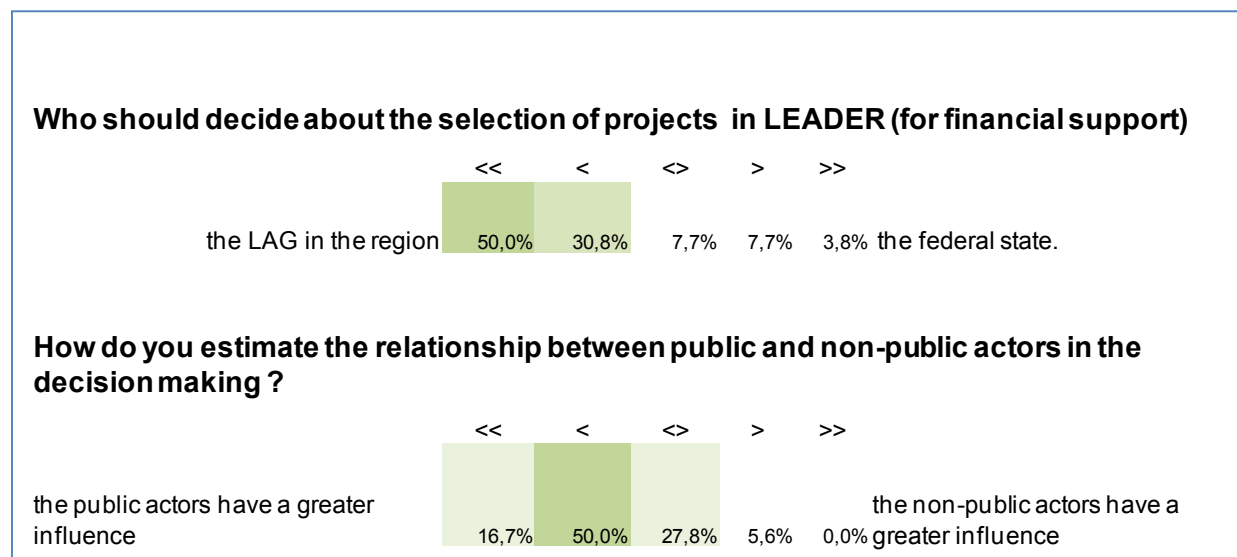
Information is collected by means of an online survey carried out in eight LEADER regions across four different federal states in Germany. About 50-100 non-participants per region were contacted via E-mail with requests for participation. “Non-participants” were defined as persons who are neither members of the decision-making body nor beneficiaries of the LEADER projects. Respondents come from municipalities as well as from different associations of the civil society. Addresses of potential respondents were obtained either from the various LAG managements (in this case actors involved in an outer circle: e.g. local workshop participants who are not part of decision-making bodies) or via a google search (outsiders). Since this is still an ongoing research project, only results from two regions (n=58) are included in the presentation. The reply rate amounts to more than 50% (this exceeds our expectation of 30 to 50%).

In the questionnaire, filtering is important as the kind of knowledge of respondents is very different. Considering this, an online survey is much more suitable than the paper version. To get better insights, it is important to also make use of open questions like „Have you ever thought to ask for funding for a LEADER project? Why/Why not?“.

These examinations are part of the evaluation of Rural Development Programs (RDPs) in four federal states in Germany with 115 LEADER-regions. Besides the survey of non-participants, another source of information is a survey with members of the decision-making bodies of the local actions groups (more than 2000 answers, reply rate more than 60%), conducted in 2017/2018 with written questionnaires in an online-survey.

3. Results & conclusion

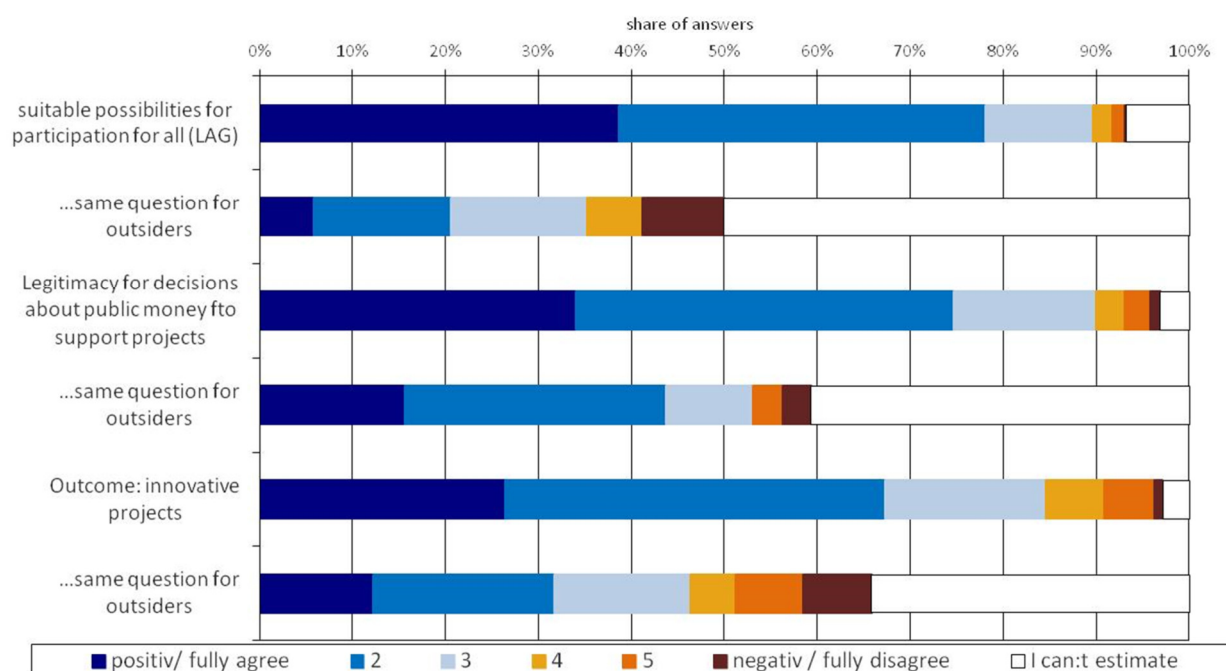
This presentation contains preliminary results concerning the external views of the work of LEADER to gain insights about the possibilities of participation and possible obstacles preventing participation. In figure 1, the share of answers for two general estimations about participation within LEADER is shown. The dispersion of answers for the first question underpins that non-participants of decision-making processes also support the idea that a regionally embedded organisation should be responsible for the selection of projects. The results of the second question support a well-described problem: there is an estimation of a (slight) dominance of public actors in decision-making.



Source: survey of non-participants (2019), n=58

Figure 1: Estimations about participation from the view of non-participants

Figure 2 shows differences between members of the decision-making bodies of the local action groups in contrast to the answers of the outsiders/non-participants. Also, the ratings of the non-participants are mainly positive, but also show a high share of "I can't estimate" judgements.



Source: survey of non-participants (2019), n=58 / survey of LAG-members (2017) (results from one federal state)

Figure 2: Estimations from participants in comparison with non-participants

The first conclusion from these preliminary results is that the method of investigation is working (the reply rate is better than expected, the „I can't estimate“ rate is not worse than expected). But further surveys in

the six remaining LEADER regions are required as the results can vary from region to region. Also, the number of respondents up to now is too low for deeper analyses.

Finally, we did not expect a „closed shop“ in the sense that the decision-making body may want to spend the funding only for own projects, but participation within LEADER is sometimes a „hidden shop“. For an average inhabitant the shop is in a side street and the door is open but a lack of knowledge about the existence or whereabouts of the shop prevents the inhabitant from finding it. In addition, similar to many participative processes, there are „hidden hurdles“ in LEADER in the form of informal barriers. Overall, it is at least already a good sign that there is an informed/invited outer circle beyond the inner circle of the local actions groups.

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