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Conference Paper — Manuscript Version (Preprint)

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Suggested Citation: Pollermann, Kim; Fynn, Lynn-Livia (2021) : Performance of LEADER – explanatory variables for outputs of a place-based and participative approach, Regional Studies Association, Annual Conference 2020: Transformations: Relational Spaces, beyond Urban and Rural 17th –20th June 2020, Ljubljana, Slovenia (cancelled), ZBW - Leibniz Information Centre for Economics, Kiel, Hamburg

This Version is available at:
https://hdl.handle.net/10419/228488

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Regional Studies Association
Annual Conference 2020: Transformations: Relational Spaces, beyond Urban and Rural
17th –20th June 2020, Ljubljana, Slovenia [cancelled]

Special Session: The Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) Instrument:
An EU Programme to Address Fragile Territories

Performance of LEADER – explanatory variables for outputs of a place-based and participative approach

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Introduction

Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) – in rural areas implemented as LEADER – is a well-established "territorial delivery mechanism". LEADER started 25 years ago and now counts 2600 Local Action Groups (LAGs), which are embedded in a multi-level governance system (Pollermann et al. 2020).

LEADER is a place-based (Tomaney 2010) and participatory approach where a so-called Local Action Group (LAG) composed of stakeholders from local government, civil society and economy steers the implementation of its local development strategy. The LAGs dispose their own budgets (~3 Mio. € in examined regions) to support project implementation. 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 (Thuesen & Nielsen 2014; Pollermann et al. 2014).

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

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

Material and methods

To examine the performance of LEADER, we utilise results from the 2014-2020 funding period, especially structural data of 115 LAGs in four German federal states ("Länder"): 24 LEADER-regions in Hesse, 41 in Lower-Saxony, 28 in North Rhine-Westphalia, and 22 in Schleswig-Holstein. Main material was collected by three surveys using written questionnaires (mainly executed as online surveys):

- LAG member survey: members of the LAGs' decision-making bodies in all examined Länder in 2017/2018 (requested persons N=3308, answering persons n=1999, response rate: 60 percent). 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 percent) 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 local development strategies, measure 19.2), (N=1267, n=1079, response rate: 85 percent), the respondents were asked for estimations about project development, funding procedures and the 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).

Results

This abstract contains only preliminary results; more detailed deliverables will follow in the conference session. The results are related to single variables of the LEADER implementation and their impact on LEADER performance. Due to complex relations of different aspects, we mainly elaborate findings on simplified output indicators.

Our results offer several insights, one being that a higher staff capacity in LAG managements in the different LEADER regions fosters a higher share of innovative projects, which supports a policy recommendation to predefine minimum targets for staff capacity as a prior condition for funding the LAGs.

Regarding place delimitation, results show that a suitable region design is not dependent on the population size of the various LEADER regions. The satisfaction of the LAG members surveyed is generally high with no significantly strong impacts due to the different population sizes ranging from 30,000 to 150,000 inhabitants.

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