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Theme: G08 – Cooperation and Local/Regional Development

Fostering (supra-)regional cooperation through LEADER/CLLD

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Abstract

Community-led local development (CLLD), initiated as LEADER in 1991, is a bottom-up-oriented, participatory approach driven by cooperation between local actors in rural areas. It forms part of regional development programmes (RDPs), which are the basis of funding in rural areas in the EU. Through LEADER/CLLD, budgets are allocated to LEADER regions on the local level to support the implementation of projects in line with so-calledlocal development strategies (LDS), which state the distinct objectives for local development in each region.

This contribution focusses on one of the LEADER features, namely „LEADER cooperation“, which explicitly supports cooperation between rural communities from two or more different regions through joint projects. The two main types of cooperation are

1. inter-territorial cooperation between two or more LAGs or comparable groups within a Member State and
2. transnational cooperation between two or more LAGs or comparable groups from different Member States.

In our contribution, we present and discuss the state of implementation (experiences with different types, topics) as well as administrative aspects and outcomes of cooperation projects based on data from the evaluation of LEADER in four German federal states .

In a first analysis of results, the larger time investment required in supraregional cooperation and different project selection criteria are identified as common challenges faced during the planning and management of LEADER cooperation projects while knowledge gain is widely seen as an added benefit.

Keywords: LEADER, cooperation project, rural, partnership, Germany

1 Introduction

Participatory decision-making could facilitate more flexible, inclusive and effective planning for rural development (Castro-Arce & Vanclay 2020). One example for such an approach is Community-led local development (CLLD), a bottom-up-oriented approach driven by cooperation between local actors. CLLD was initiated as LEADER in 1991 and forms part of regional development programmes (RDPs), which are the basis of funding in rural areas in the EU. LEADER/CLLD works in a multilevel governance framework (Pollermann et al. 2020), where abudget is allocated to each Local Action Group (LAG) on the local level to support the implementation of projects in line with their local development strategies (LDS).

LEADER is characterised by a set of principles: territorial approach, bottom-up approach, puplic-private partnership, integrated and multi-sectoral approach, innovation, cooperation with other regions and networking (EC 2006). Despite the positive assessment of LEADER in past funding periods and the general acceptance of the underlying principles of LEADER, implementation has faced a number of detailed obstacles (Dax 2021).

Our contribution will focus on a main feature, namely „LEADER cooperation“, which explicitly supports cooperation between rural communities from two or more different regions through joint projects. The two main types of cooperation are:

1. inter-territorial cooperation between two or more LAGs or comparable groups within the same Member State (in Germany: same or different federal state) and
2. transnational cooperation between two or more LAGs or comparable groups from different Member States.

In his paper on transregional cooperation, Dax (2021) establishes that cooperations could support the broadening of views and perspectives while providing relevant incentives for increasing and strengthening skill patterns and institutional processes. Our research aims to identify patterns, benefits as well as possible challenges faced during the implementation of cooperation projects in four German federal states.

2 Data & methods

Against this background, the aim of this paper is to evaluate the benefits from and obstacles of LEADER funded cooperation projects. In our contribution, we discuss the state of implementation (experiences with different types, topics) as well as administrative aspects and outcomes of cooperation projects based on data from the evaluation of LEADER in four German federal states (Fynn & Pollermann 2022).

Data was collected from 115 LEADER regions from Hesse (24 LAGs), Lower Saxony (41), North Rhine-Westphalia (28) and Schleswig-Holstein (22) by means of two surveys, using written questionnaires. These were mainly executed as online surveys:

- 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 and open questions to grasp more detailed assessments about specific problems.

Usually, a six-point Likert scale was used to classify personal estimations of the LAG members.

- Survey of beneficiaries of LEADER cooperation projects (M19.3) in 2021 (partly in comparision to M 19.2: other LEADER-projects), N=148, n=132, response rate: 89 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.

Funding databases from each federal state were another important source of data, for example, with respect to topics and contents of cooperation projects and the expenditure of funds.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Experiences with the implementation of cooperation projects

Between 2014 and 2020 of the last EU funding period, a total of 166 cooperation projects (M 19.3) were implemented. The overall public expenditure (EU and the respective federal state) amounted to 9.2 million Euros from public funds, which corresponds to only 5 % of funding for all LEADER projects (M 19.2 & M 19.3) in the given time period.

To illustrate the prevalence of cooperation projects in the LAGs of the four federal states, the share of LAGs with experiences with the different types of cooperation – based on the location of the partner region – are shown in table 1.

Table 1: Share of LAGs with experiences with cooperation projects

Location of cooperation partner	Hesse	Lower Saxony	North Rhine-Westphalia	Schleswig-Holstein
Same federal state	87 %	83 %	68 %	100 %
Other federal state	48 %	20 %	36 %	9 %
Other country	9 %	10 %	21 %	0 %

Source: LAG management survey (2018), n = 114

As shown in table 1, a large share of LAGs had experiences with cooperation projects with other LAGs in the same federal state. This can be attributed to lower administrative hurdles compared to cross-border cooperation due to a common funding basis (guidelines and regulations) and existing networking structures[1] for LAGs within the federal states. In Schleswig-Holstein, in addition, there was strong support from managing authorities at the federal state level right from the start of the funding period. This aimed at fostering networking activities between LAGs with the main purpose of kickstarting cooperation projects.

[1] Examples include the LEADER steering committee in Lower Saxony, the Hessian Regional Forums (registered association), the Network of LEADER regions in Schleswig-Holstein which is supported by the Academy for the Rural Areas of Schleswig-Holstein (registered association) and a less formal network structure of LEADER regions in North Rhine-Westphalia.

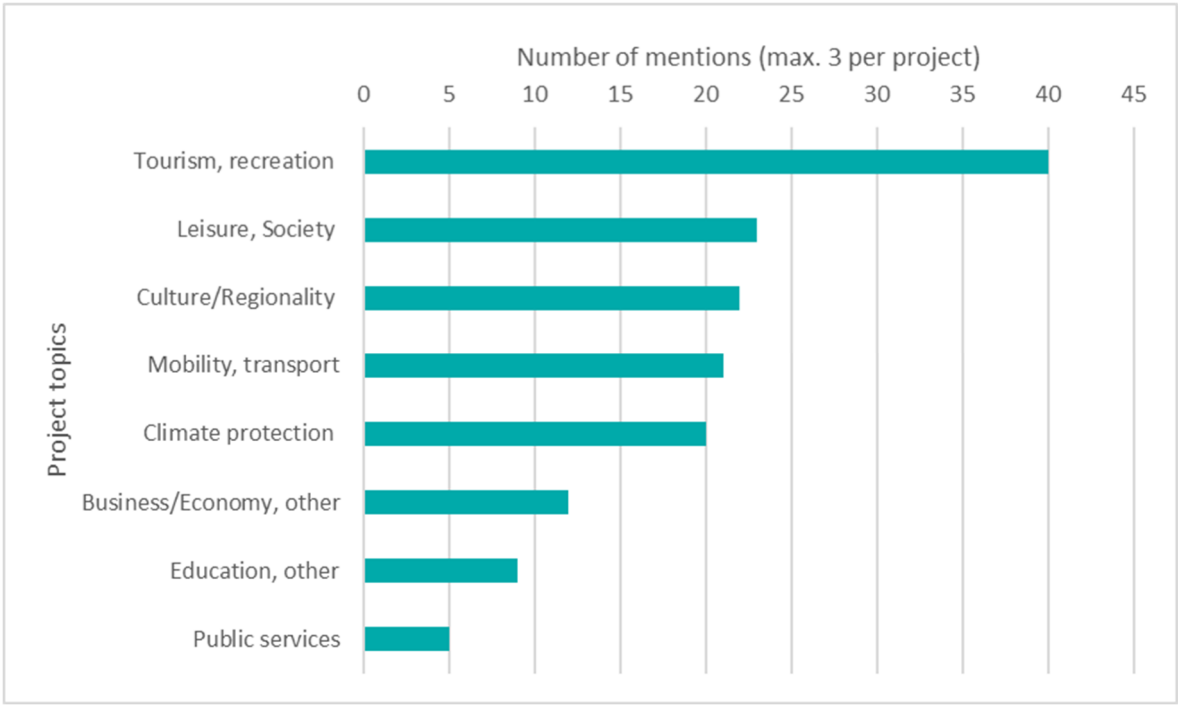
The differences in the share of experiences with other federal states can, at least in part, be explained by existing borders to neighbouring federal states. In Hesse, for example, more than two-thirds of all LAGs share borders with LAGs from other federal states. In Schleswig-Holstein, on the other hand, this is the case for only a handful of LAGs since the rest of the state is surrounded by the North and Baltic Seas and Denmark.

Similiar existing borders may be relevant for experiences with transnational projects, although this assumption cannot be supported by our data since Hesse, which shares no international borders, records experiences with transnational cooperation for 9 % of the LAGs whereas Schleswig-Holstein has none despite the border to Denmark. Also, amongst the transnational projects that were implemented are projects with LAGs from Poland and Austria. This shows that shared borders/close proximity of partner regions are not a necessity for the development and implementation of joint projects, hence there must be other limitations to cross-border cooperation than geographical distance (see chapter 3.3).

3.2 Topics of cooperation projects

In figure 1, the different topics addressed in cooperation projects are shown as the number of mentions or number of projects that were allocated a respective topic. The results show that tourism seems to be a suitable topic for interregional cooperation, followed by other leisure-related topics, culture, transport and climate protection. Common projects include the joint development of tourism concepts or marketing strategies on the basis of a shared cultural heritage and/or other natural landscape and the expansion and maintenance of biking or hiking trails by adjoining LAGs. In contrast, public services are less likely to be addressed in joint projects but rather individually by municipalities and other administrative bodies, even within a LEADER region.

Figure 1: Topics of cooperation projects (M 19.3)



Source: funding data of M19.3-projects

3.3 Challenges faced in the implementation of cooperation projects

Result of the LAG management survey indicates different funding guidelines and regulations of the individual LAGS or federal states as a common cause of problems in the process of planning and implementing cooperation projects. This includes: funding guidelines, application requirements, internal administrative procedures, accounting procedures (payment and clearing/invoicing modalities) and funding rates.

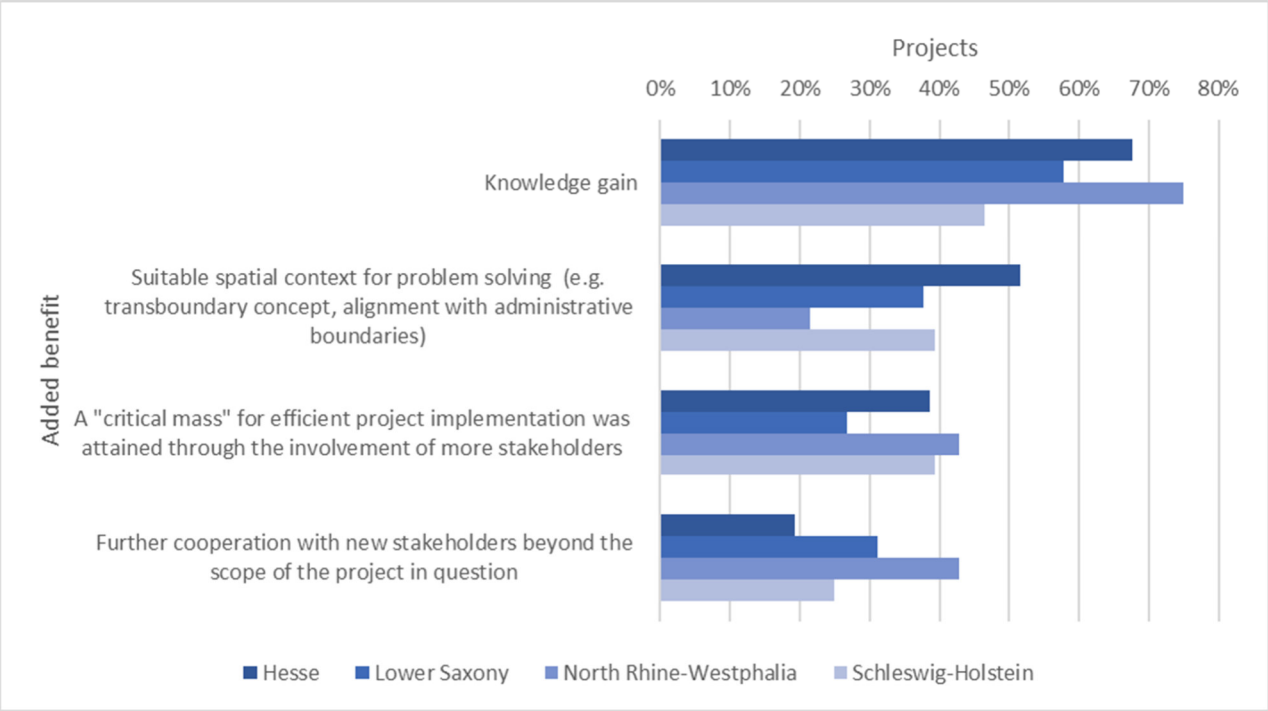
Regardless of the nature of the cooperation project, the increased time investment (e. g. for project presentations in the different decision-making bodies) and the different project selection criteria of the cooperating regions were further challenges perceived by those involved. According to beneficiaries of cooperation projects (M 19.3 survey), the relevance of the mentioned and other aspects varies:

- Larger time investment required for planning and implementation: 45 % of the surveyed beneficiaries
- Different project selection criteria in participating regions: 26 %
- Assigning duties and responsibilities: 17 %
- Difficulty finding public funds to cofinance projects: 8 %

3.4 Benefits from cooperation projects

With regard to the potential effects of cooperation projects, the results on the question of the additional benefit show that knowledge gains are perceived primarily in all countries (figure 2). In at least one-fifth of the regions, contributions to problem-solving are also seen as an added value through better spatial design of projects, greater participation in achieving a “critical mass” and cooperation with other actors on other issues or topics than the joint project.

Figure 2: Added benefits of LEADER cooperation projects



Source: M19.3-beneficiaries survey (2021)
Hessen (n=31), Lower Saxony (n=45), North Rhine-Westphalia (n=28), Schleswig-Holstein (n=28)

With regard to innovation[2], 86 % of the M 19.3 beneficiaries in Schleswig-Holstein and around 75 % in the other three federal states find that their projects foster a new idea or approach to local development in their region. This is much more than in the survey of the LEADER projects funded under M 19.2. [3]

4 Conclusions

Cooperation projects are a good way to address common problems faced by different rural areas as well as an opportunity for knowledge gain and for testing new and innovative solutions to rural problems.

On the downside, different funding regulations, requirements of larger time investments and different project selection criteria are common challenges in the planning and management of LEADER cooperation projects. Administrative hurdles, in particular, are a hinderance to the

[2] Question in surveys (M 19.2 and M 19.3): "Have innovative ideas or approaches for the region been implemented through your funded project?".

[3] In the M 19.2 survey the share of beneficiaries was 60 % in Hesse, 44 % in Lower Saxony, 67 % in North Rhine-Westphalia and 52 % in Schleswig-Holstein

efficient implementation of cooperation projects not only across national borders but, in the German case, across federal state borders as well.

To foster the implementation of cooperation projects the following enhancements are suggested:

- The need for simplification (e. g. adjustment of funding regulations and budgetary guidelines between federal states and where possible between EU Member States as well).
- Also, beneficial: increasing staff capacity of LAG managements which assist beneficiaries with the funding procedure.[4] This may help to reduce the weight of the administrative burden experienced especially by beneficiaries form the private and civil sectors.

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[4] The role and relevance of LAG managements is discussed in more detail in Fynn & Pollermann (2022).