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Youth participation in rural development – insights from LEADER projects for young people in Germany

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1 Introduction

Participation is a key element of LEADER. This approach for a Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) is a well-established "territorial delivery mechanism" to foster rural development in the European Union (Servillo & De Bruijn 2018: 10). One main assumption of LEADER is that rural support measures become more effective if decision-making and implementation are embedded locally (Pollermann et al. 2020). Accordingly, a further assumption is that there is an added value in the sense of a better identification of local needs, more commitment of stakeholders and a greater scope for innovation. One part of this are additional benefits for LEADER projects in terms of enhanced results compared to similar projects implemented through other measures without a participative approach (Pisani et al. 2023). The **participation within LEADER** includes Local Action Groups (LAGs) as the decision-making bodies for project selection in the various LEADER regions. Also, during project development and implementation, the participation of different stakeholders and the future users is possible.

Participation has been a key part of pro-youth strategies in the past years. Approaching **participation** of the youth in rural areas is no easy task, also because of the urban bias in the general literature on how to promote youth inclusion in public policies (Trivelli & Morel 2021), which according to the authors is "a trend increasingly challenged by policymakers" (ibid.: 635). Despite existing opinions that the youth is not suited to play a proactive role in policymaking, it has been proven that they can contribute effectively if included, for example, in planning processes and the evaluation of programme effectiveness (Head 2011, Trivelli & Morel 2021). In the academic literature on youth participation, there are still vast knowledge gaps on participation in rural areas, which is often attributed to the absence of impact evaluations (Trivelli & Morel 2021). One important aspect is the availability of places just for young people, as spaces where they can establish their own norms and rules (Eriksen & Houborg 2025).

Against the backdrop of demographic changes and an ageing population, particularly in rural areas, the issue of living conditions that cater to the specific needs of young people must be discussed. In

this context, however, youth participation is a rare topic within LEADER literature. One example is Shucksmith et al. (2021), who, in a case study of a LEADER region in England describe the "need to support young people aged 20-34 to stay in the local area was prioritised because of the demographic imbalance identified in the statistical report". Although "youth" is sometimes a topic in Local Development Strategies (LDS), the share of young people (below 30) active on the LAG boards is very small. The EU has reacted to these issues to a certain degree, stating that in the current funding period 2023-2027, each LAG board must include at least one young person (below 30 or 40 years of age the latter in member states with a particularly old population).

The research topic of this contribution is to discuss the implementation of youth participation within LEADER, with a review of survey results of projects for young people, whereby the focus lies on the project level and not on participation within the decision-making-process for the selection of projects.

2 Methods

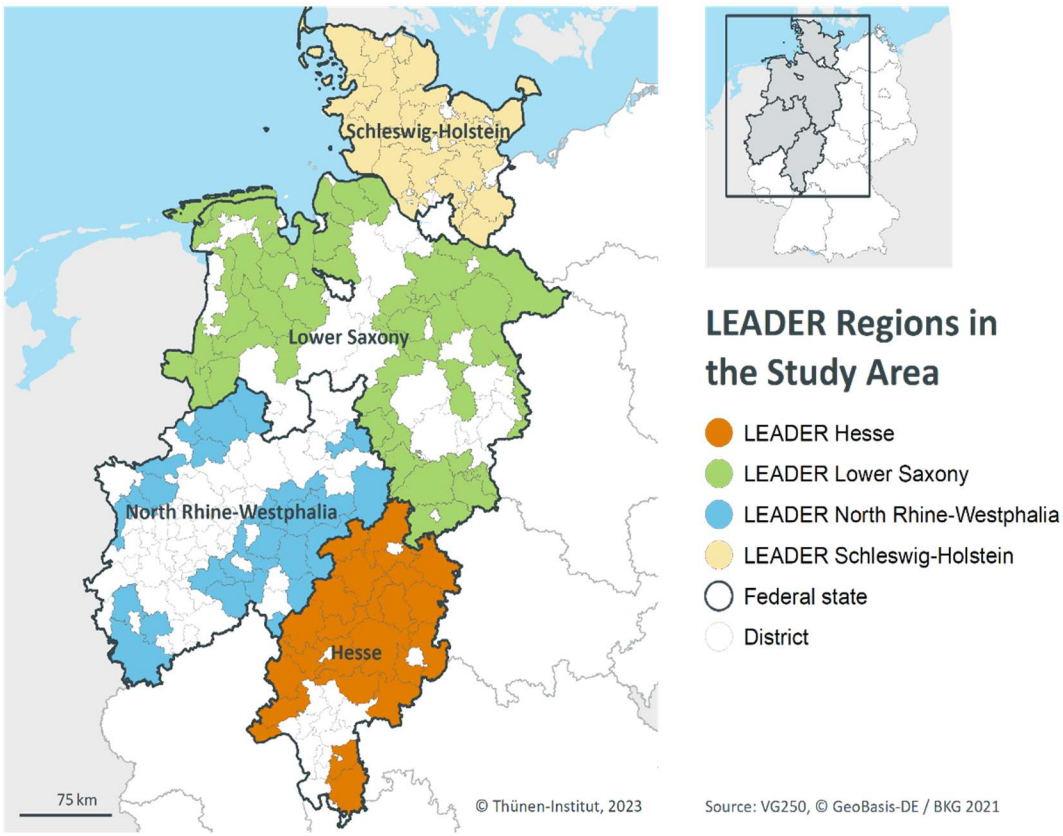
This contribution is based on findings from the evaluation of four Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) with **115 LEADER regions in four German federal states** ("*Länder*") shown in figure 1: Hesse (24 LAGs), Lower-Saxony (41 LAGs), North Rhine-Westphalia (28 LAGs) and Schleswig-Holstein (22 LAGs). The evaluation began in 2016 and examined programme implementation for the entire course of the funding period.[1] Drawing on experience gained in the evaluation of RDPs in the previous funding period (see details for methods in Pollermann et al. 2014), a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods was used.

The results presented in this paper originate mainly from a **survey of beneficiaries (2024)**: The surveys were conducted mostly online using semi-standardised questionnaires for LEADER projects (M19.2). All grant recipients of projects completed between 2019 and 2023 were surveyed. For this contribution the empirical results are shown for just one of the federal states (North Rhine-Westphalia). The response rate was 83 % (448 completed questionnaires out of 537 beneficiaries contacted).

Another source of evidence are eight **case studies** (two LEADER-regions in every federal state) in 2022 which were selected based on document analyses and project screening. the main research methods applied were qualitative, guided interviews for all projects as well as on-site visits with respect to infrastructural projects. Seven of the 60 interviews in total were conducted with beneficiaries of youth related projects. The interviews served to gain qualitative insights, either explorative to expand the knowledge base and prepare for standardised surveys, or in a focussed manner to gain in-depth insights into assessments and correlations on specific issues.

[1] The final ex-post evaluation reports will be available in 2026.

Figure 1: Map of the 115 LEADER regions examined



Source: Thünen Institute.

3 Results

In terms of implementation, projects relating to public services – such as social places for gatherings and interaction – are particularly relevant to the topic of "youth." Village development measures can have a clear youth-specific focus, but many measures are also relevant to people of all ages. For LEADER regions, youth projects are a possible funding target in line with the LDS. A wide range of intervention types exist. These can be divided into investment projects for infrastructure provision and projects for participation or capacity building through training and networking.

The recipients of the grants included local authorities in particular, but also LAGs and private organizations. Often associations that operate village community facilities and, in some cases, also own them, played a role as well.

To give insights into youth participation, results from the case studies and the survey of beneficiaries are displayed in the following sections.

3.1 Case studies insights

Diverse results emerged from the projects examined. The important target groups addressed were (underage) teenagers (from 13 to 17 years old), with some of the offerings also aimed at children or young adults. The different outputs ultimately resulted in the creation of non-commercial meeting places for young people to spend their free time. These were generally well received, improving the attractiveness of rural communities and, presumably, promoting place identity as a result. Some funded youth centers provide supervised activities. According to those responsible for the project, such open services reach different milieus, particularly children and young people from less affluent families who have fewer opportunities to spend their free time than children and young people from more affluent families, who often have larger homes and can afford to participate in commercial activities.

The funding enabled new services to be offered: *"The young people have really taken to the space. This need was already there when we were teenagers ourselves and rode our mopeds around the church here. We never had such a meeting place, and neither did the following generations, where we could say we had a place to retreat and meet. And then we said, okay, if we build the property [a village community center], let's also put a youth room in it. We have a little space for it somewhere."* [Case study 2022].

Another example are investments in mobile youth work, which is important in places where there are otherwise hardly any dedicated rooms for the youth for free use. Such approaches have been shown to promote relationship building: *"to have contact, to establish relationships and thus also to offer help. Also, to offer individual help."* [Case study 2022]. Here, early involvement in the project contributes to a target-group tailored service.

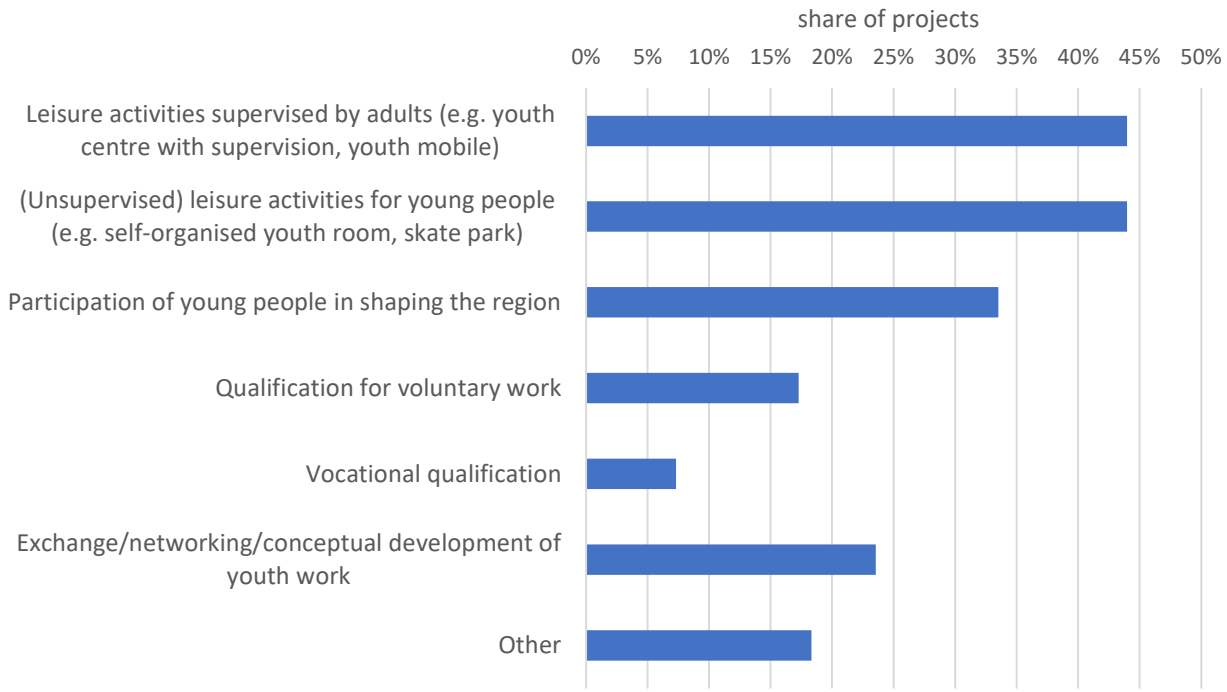
In the case studies, the assumption of responsibility by young people was also attributed with positive effects on personal development and attachment to the village or town and its clubs/associations: *"When they can meet here and make use of it, whether they are ten, twelve or fourteen years old, we have [...] tied them a little bit to the place, but also allowed them to grow into a little bit of responsibility. Because everyone who is active there will later take on leadership positions in the shooting club or get involved. Whether it's the sports club or any other club, those who get involved learn to take on responsibility and then get involved in the community [...]. And if there are slightly different opinions about what cleanliness means or different opinions about noise levels, that's happened too. But that's how you build the next generation."* [Case study 2022]. However, this ideal chain of effects does not seem to be a sure-fire success; another project emphasised that motivating young people to get involved can also be difficult: "*But if you say, 'You have to help out a bit' it becomes difficult. That always falls back on the older generation*" [Case study 2022].

3.2 Survey results

In the survey of beneficiaries conducted in 2024, 34% of the LEADER projects in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) stated project goals and/or impacts in the area of youth, so that more specific topics were categorised for these 191 projects.

Regarding project contents the results shown in figure 2 illustrate the great importance of the two categories relating to leisure activities (with/without supervision). The participation of young people and projects that promote participation and exchange/networking/conceptual development were also well represented. Over one third of the projects contribute to the participation of young people in shaping the region via workshops or participation in project development. In the less frequently mentioned categories relating to qualification, the focus was predominantly on voluntary activities rather than on vocational education.

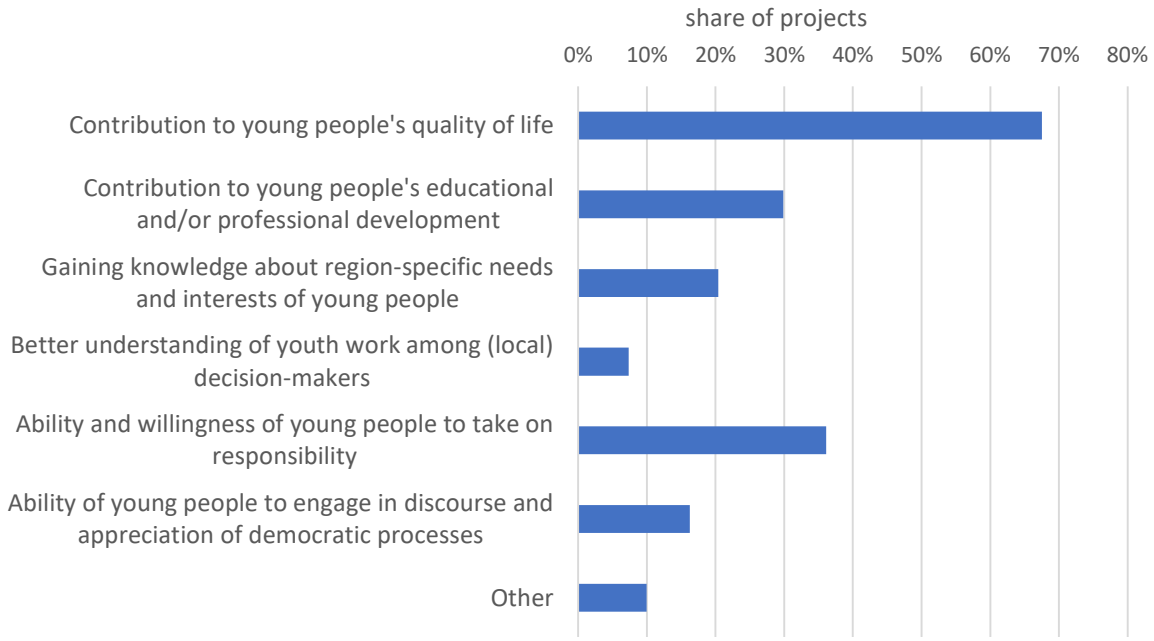
Figure 2: Categories of youth projects



Source: Survey of beneficiaries (NRW, 2024), n=191.

The effects of the projects described in the survey are shown in figure 3. Based on this, a concrete contribution to the quality of life of young people can be assumed in around two thirds of the projects. The second most frequently mentioned effect was the promotion of responsibility, so that the causal relationship described in the case studies can be classified as a broad effect.

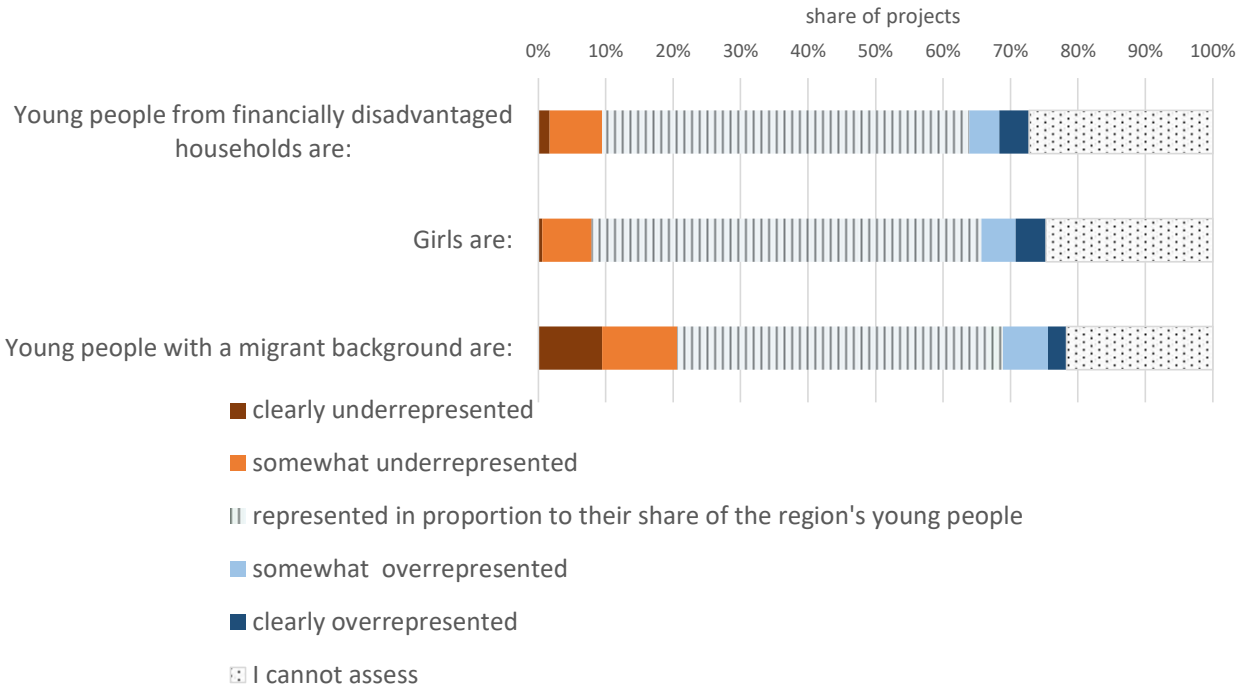
Figure 3: Effects of youth projects



Source: Survey of beneficiaries (NRW, 2024), n=191.

In terms of the target groups of young people reached by the projects (see figure 4), the responses mostly indicated balanced usage. Contrary to what was assumed after evaluating the case studies, young people from financially disadvantaged households are rarely overrepresented. The fact that both girls and young people from financially disadvantaged households were “significantly overrepresented” in a small proportion of the projects in this category indicates that there were also some projects specifically aimed at these target groups. The most significant deviation from the proportion of all young people in the region was found among young people with a migrant background, who are (significantly) underrepresented in one fifth of the projects.

Figure 4: Representation of different user groups of young people



Source: Survey of beneficiaries (NRW, 2024), n=191.

4 Conclusions

The high share (= 34 %) of projects with benefits for young people underpin the growing importance of this issue within LEADER in Germany. Most frequent outputs are projects for leisure activities and places for young people, which contribute to the quality of life in rural areas. The participation of young people and projects that promote participation and exchange, networking or conceptual development were also well represented. Over one third of projects contribute to the participation of young people in shaping their various regions.

Looking at projects for young people, some results indicate long-term benefits for rural development. An early participation in project development promotes well-tailored projects for the specific needs of this target group. In addition, the direct involvement in project management instils a sense of responsibility in the youth and helps to foster skills such as self-organisation.

In the long run, both suitable living conditions and a sense of belonging and responsibility, which can be fostered through participation and volunteering, may contribute to young people staying or returning to rural areas. This is a very relevant development in light of the current direction of demographic trends, but it can only be achieved if other needs are fulfilled, such as the provision of suitable job opportunities and infrastructure.

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