

The LEADER Method

Transferring Experience of the Visegrad Group Countries to Georgia



Edited by:

Łukasz Sykała
Magdalena Dej
Oskar Wolski

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**The LEADER Method
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of the Visegrad Group Countries
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Institute of Urban Development

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CHAPTER 4

THE LEADER APPROACH IN VISEGRAD GROUP COUNTRIES IN 2007–2013

A programming period of 2007–2013 is the first European Union budgetary perspective in which the Visegrad Group countries participate from the very beginning, thereby implementing various kinds of community policies on an equal footing with the other Member States. One such measure is the LEADER programme, implemented on a wider scale in the Visegrad countries from 2007 onwards. The main principles related to the implementation of this approach have been strongly unified at European level. However, due to differences found in particular developmental conditions and in individual countries of the Community, there are noticeable dissimilarities as far as a specific solution of the LEADER programme realisation is concerned. At the same time, the effects of its implementation in particular countries are different. The assumptions and effects of the LEADER approach implementation in particular countries are the result of not only regulations adopted at the Community and national level, but also distinctive local and regional conditions among which the specificity of rural areas, which are the recipients of the mechanism, appears to have a significant importance. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to compare certain aspects related to the implementation of the LEADER approach in the Visegrad countries in 2007–2013. It will include the identification of existing similarities and differences between them in the analysed material.

The structure of this chapter is bisected. The first part presents the analysis of existing data results, as well as the results of quantitative research. The experience of the Visegrad countries gained during the implementation of the LEADER approach before 2007 were presented at the beginning. In the next place, the assumptions of the LEADER programme

for 2007–2013, which have been specified in the RDP of the involved countries, were discussed (i.e. expected effects, LAGs' establishment criteria, a size of funds dedicated to this mechanism, system implementation). Thereafter, an analysis of selected quantitative effects of the LEADER approach implementation in the Visegrad countries in the context of RDP objectives was done. (i.e. a number of established tri-sectoral partnerships, their total area and number of inhabitants, a level of utilization of available funds). In addition, the characteristics of LAG operating in the Visegrad countries taking into account selected features of these partnerships was presented (i.e. size, a number of municipalities, a number of inhabitants, a number of members in total and according to sectors). In the second part of the chapter the results of qualitative studies relating to specific aspects of the implementation of the LEADER approach in the Visegrad countries were presented. Firstly, the LEADER programme evaluation in the countries surveyed concerning the realisation of the seven key features of this approach was done. At the same time, examples of the best practices concerning the realisation of the analysed method of rural development in the Visegrad countries were presented. Finally, selected advantages and disadvantages of the LEADER programme in the Visegrad countries were discussed.

In this chapter various sources of information and data regarding the implementation of the LEADER approach in the Visegrad countries were used. The experience gained by countries which have been implementing the LEADER mechanism before 2007 were collected and described on the basis of information that can be found on the European Commission website which was devoted to the LEADER + programme in the years 2000–2006¹. Aims and regulations regarding implementation of the LEADER approach in the Visegrad countries in 2007–2013 were discussed on the basis of the RDP analysis of particular countries. In order to evaluate quantitative effects of the LEADER programme implementation and characteristics of the LAG operating in the Visegrad countries data collected by the project partners were used. Financial data, which were used to present the amount of funds dedicated to the LEADER approach and the level of utilisation of these funds in individual countries, were obtained from The European Network for Rural Development website². Qualitative research on the implementation of the LEADER approach in the Visegrad countries in 2007–2013 (the assessment in the context of seven key features, identification of good practices and analysis of selected pros and cons of this programme) relied on the expertise of involved partners.

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/index_pl.htm.

² http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/en/home-page_en.html.

4.1. The LEADER approach realisation (quantitative analysis)

4.1.1. The LEADER approach in the Visegrad Group countries before 2007

The LEADER programme in the Visegrad countries has been implemented on a wider scale since the beginning of 2007. However, it should be stressed that the Visegrad countries have already had some experience in the implementation of rural development policy using the ideas of the LEADER approach. This experience is related to the implementation of the LEADER+ programme in 2004–2006 (excluding Slovakia) and other programmes and actions based on this approach, which were implemented before the accession to the EU.

All the Visegrad countries carried out pilot programmes aimed at their (especially their local communities) proper preparation for the effective realisation of the LEADER approach before the accession to the European Union. In the Czech Republic this role was fulfilled by Rural Renovation Programme (2001–2003), funded under the programme called SAPARD³. In Poland, since the mid-nineties, several programmes and initiatives using bottom-up initiatives and partnership (cross-sectoral) approaches to rural development were implemented. Environmental Partnership Foundation (Fundacja Partnerstwo dla Środowiska), which supports the creation and maintenance of partner groups since 1999 (i.e. reaching agreements between local governments, NGOs and businesses which allow joint efforts on the development of specific area while respecting the environment), provided a significant contribution to the development of local partnerships in Poland. Initiatives undertaken by the Forum for the Animation of Rural Areas (Forum Aktywizacji Obszarów Wiejskich) and the Cooperation Fund Foundation (Fundacja Fundusz Współpracy) under the Agroline Programme (2003–2006) prepared rural communities in Poland to the implementation of LEADER-type actions. During the realisation of this programme the following activities were carried out: distribution of information regarding LEADER approach, local partnerships' animators training and collecting and popularising information regarding these partnerships. What is more, under the Agroline Programme (since 2004), small grants for training and information activities for potential LAGs were assigned. Some Polish regions implemented other pilot projects in cooperation with various countries of the European Union. In the case of Slovakia, in the period prior to the Community structures

³ SAPARD (*Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development*) – pre-accession programme for candidate countries to the European Union, which main objective was to adapt the agricultural sector to the requirements of food hygiene and environmental standards obligatory within the Community. In addition, under this instrument, operations aimed at diversification of economic activities and sources of income of the population in rural areas were supported. Furthermore, projects aimed at the development and improvement of infrastructure in rural areas were co-financed (Strzelecki 2008).

accession, three programmes promoting the LEADER approach were introduced. The first one was the Fund for Rural Development (1999–2002), funded from the PHARE⁴ programme resources. The funds from this initiative were used for cross-sector partnerships creation and implementation of local development strategies. Another pilot programme in Slovakia was called “The support of regional development of the Banská Bystrica region” (2002–2003) and was funded by the UK government. The aim of this venture was to support the creation of appropriate development strategies for the LEADER approach. Moreover, in 2003–2004, thanks to the support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Local Agenda 21 project was introduced in Slovakia. Its aim was likewise to support the creation of local development strategies similar to LEADER. In Hungary, before the European Union accession, two programmes were enacted in order to prepare for the implementation of the LEADER approach. Agricultural and Rural Development Micro Regional Programmes, which were financed by national funds, were accomplished in 1999–2002. The support was intended not only to elaborate local development plans and initiatives but also to strengthen local partnerships and improve management capacity. The second project, the Rural Development Target Programme: LEADER Pilot Programme (2001–2004), was also financed from the state budget. Actions taken under this initiative (analysis of a region situation and implementation of local development plans) supposed to prepare for the implementation of the future LEADER+ programme⁵.

After the accession to the European Union between 2004 and 2006 almost all the Visegrad countries, except Slovakia, implemented LEADER+ programme. All activities related to creation of tri-sectoral partnerships and issuing and implementation of local development strategies were supported by sectoral operational programmes aimed at modernization of agriculture and rural development. Despite the fact that, in the first years following the accession to the Community, Slovakia did not directly implement the LEADER programme, it does not mean that the country has completely abandoned the implementation of this approach. Tri-sectoral partnerships similar to LEADER were realised thanks to the SAPARD programme support in 2004 and 2005. The main aim of the aforementioned undertakings was to build up a genuine capacity to prepare, manage and implement rural development strategies based on the principles of the LEADER approach. As a result of these activities a creation of local development strategies for 11 areas in the country was supported. **It should also be noted that in the case of Czech Republic, apart from the LEADER+ programme, there were two parallel national programmes (financed from the state budget) which based on the ideas and experience of the LEADER mechanism.** The

⁴ PHARE (*Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies*) – pre-accession program which was created in 1989 in order to restructure Polish and Hungarian economy. Over time, other candidate countries to the European Union were implementing this instrument (Strzelecki 2008).

⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/index_pl.htm.

first was the LEADER Czech Republic programme (2004–2007) managed by the Ministry of Agriculture. The existing LAGs were funded under this instrument. The national support for tri-sectoral partnerships was aimed at: strengthening the local economy, improving the quality of life and valorisation of natural and cultural resources. The second national programme implemented in the Czech Republic was the LEADER and Youth Programme (2004–2006) managed by the Ministry of Regional Development. This programme was addressed to associations and rural communes which are not members of the LAG. Financial support under this instrument was spent on: building tri-sectoral partnerships by improving abilities and skills, creating local development strategies and rural development education⁶.

4.1.2. The LEADER approach in the Visegrad Group countries in 2007–2013

The budgetary perspective of 2007–2013 was the first programming period in which the Visegrad countries were involved from the very beginning and implemented a variety of European policies (including the LEADER programme) on an equal footing with the other Member States of the Community. In 2007–2013, the LEADER approach was introduced under the RDP and its basic implementation principles, as mentioned in chapter 3, were accurately defined at the European level. However, due to differences in individual countries of the European Union and specific development conditions (including legal-administrative, socio-economic and spatial), these countries alter in terms of specific objectives and completion of the LEADER programme solutions (e.g. anticipated results, LAG creation criteria, funds allocation, adopted implementation system). Thus, in order to be able to compare the LEADER approach implementation and its results, it is necessary to refer to the RDP developed for particular country of the Visegrad Group.

Regardless of the many differences between the Visegrad Group countries, their common feature concerning the LEADER programme are the objectives assigned to this approach. The list of the LEADER programme efforts included in the RDP of surveyed countries comprise of: build social capital (by including LAG to a management system in a given area), improving the quality of life in rural areas, strengthening the economic potential of rural areas and more efficient use of natural and cultural resources.

Visegrad Group countries clearly differ in terms of the assumed effects of the LEADER programme in 2007–2013. These are defined in the countries' RDP (tab. 4.1). It is obvious that these differences are due to non-uniform sized potential distribution (surface and population) of each of the Visegrad countries. The highest effect ratios (calculated separately concerning the number of LAGs, the total area of partnerships and the total number of inhabitants) were assumed for Poland and the lowest for Slovakia.

⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/index_pl.htm.

The RDP analysis of the Visegrad countries revealed also differences in terms of adopted criteria for LAG creation. The differences related mainly to a number of residents allowed within a single partnership and specific areas exclusions from the field of possible LDS realisation (tab. 4.1). In the case of Poland and Slovakia, direct EU assumptions relating to LAG population (from 10 to 150 thousand. people) were accepted whereas the Czech Republic and Hungary notably reduced the upper limit for a single partnership (to 100 thousand. people). What is more, it is worth noting that Hungary also reduced the lower limit of the population for a single LAG (to 5 thousand. people). National modifications of the EU regulations regarding the number of inhabitants in tri-sectoral partnerships should be seen as an attempt to adjust the LEADER programme to specifics of rural areas of each country.

Due to the differences in the existing definition of rural areas, the Visegrad Group countries' RDP has exemptions for settlement units which were included in LDS for particular countries. In the case of Hungary, towns with a population exceeding 10 thousand people were excluded from LAG, while in Slovakia, towns with a population exceeding 20 thousand inhabitants were not to be included into the LEADER programme. The

Tab. 4.1. Selected assumptions of RDP in 2007–2013 concerning the LEADER programme in the Visegrad countries

RDP feature	Czech Republic	Poland	Slovakia	Hungary
A number of LAG	112	300	25	50
The total area of LAG [thous. km ²]	43.0	152.8	12.0	41.1
The total number of inhabitants in LAG [thous. people]	3,300.0	10,000.0	350.0	2,500.0
The permissible number of inhabitants within one LAG [thous. people]	10–100	10–150	10–150	5–100
Exemptions related to the area covered by LDS	cities over 25 thousand inhabitants	municipalities over 5 thousand inhabitants	towns over 20 thousand inhabitants	towns over 10 thousand inhabitants or with population density exceeding 120 people per km ² , a towns located within the Budapest agglomeration.

Source: the summary is based on the RDP 2007–2013 for the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary

Czech Republic did not allow towns that exceed 25 thousand residents to join the project. Polish RDP stated that LDS will not be implemented within urban municipalities with a population exceeding 5 thousand residents as well as in towns of more than 20 thousand residents located within urban-rural municipalities. Thereby Poland, in comparison to the other Visegrad countries, is characterised by the lowest consequence concerning the entry criteria for the LAG. In Poland, in 2007–2013, urban municipalities with a population ranging from 5 thousand up to 20 thousand people were not allow to gain the support in the LEADER approach implementation, while the same-sized towns in urban-rural municipalities were free to take advantage of the EAFRD provisions⁷. It should also be noted that Hungary adopted two additional entry criteria regarding areas which look forward to being included in the composition of the LAG. In case of this country, towns and villages with a population density higher than 120 people / km² and those located within the agglomeration of Budapest were also excluded from the LEADER programme.

Another obvious difference in the implementation of the LEADER approach in the years 2007–2013 between the Visegrad countries is the size of the funds allocated for the implementation of this programme (tab. 4.2). However, as in the case of the intended effects, these differences are associated with different size potential of these countries. It should be remembered that the EAFRD resources for RDP (i.e. LEADER programme) were divided between the Member States, taking into account the population criterion. Nevertheless, as stated in chapter 3, individual countries could freely allocate the funds between RDP axes, as long as they did not exceed fixed percentage thresholds. In the case of the fourth axis (i.e. LEADER) additional differentiating criterion for new and old members of the Community was introduced. The Visegrad countries, which joined the European Union in 2004, had to allocate at least 2.5% of the total funds obtained for RPD implementation to the fourth axis.

Among the surveyed countries, the largest amount of public funds (i.e. EAFRD funds and national public sources) on the implementation of the LEADER programme in 2007–2013 was allocated in Poland (EUR 787.5 million). In contrast, the smallest expenditure on the LEADER approach implementation was seen in Slovakia (EUR 76.2 million). In the case of Hungary and the Czech Republic the realisation of the LEADER programme involved respectively EUR 275.7 million and EUR 205.8 million.

Compared to the total value of funds foreseen for RDP implementation, the largest amount of funds for the LEADER programme was spent in the Czech Republic (5.6%).

⁷ In the new programming period (2014–2020) Poland unified RDP regulations concerning areas covered by LDS. Currently, the LEADER programme will be implemented throughout the country in towns and villages with population of less than 20 thousands. Therefore, it must be considered that RDP regulations were adapted to the polish settlement system in a more efficient manner. LDS can be now introduced in all small towns (i.e. of less than 20 thousand inhabitants). These, due to the relatively even distribution in the country, are local business and services centres performing various functions contributing to surrounding rural areas.

Tab. 4.2. Distribution of funds dedicated in RDP 2007–2013 for LEADER approach implementation in the Visegrad countries [mln EUR]

LEADER programme functioning	The Czech Republic	Poland	Slovakia	Hungary
Implementation of LDS	150.6	640.5	60.4	204.9
Implementation of cooperation projects	17.6	15.0	3.7	27.3
LAG functioning, skills acquisition and activation	37.6	132.0	12.0	43.5
Overall expenditures for the LEADER approach implementation in the RDP 2007–2013	205.8	787.5	76.2	275.7
General expenditure on RDP 2007–2013 implementation	3,670.1	17,430.1	2,597.1	5,255.9

Notes: the summary covers all public funds (i.e. EAFRD funds and national public funds)

allocated to the LEADER programme implementation in the RDP 2007–2013

Source: the summary is based on data found on the European Network for Rural Development website (<http://enrd.ec.europa.eu>)

On the other hand, the lowest share of these expenditures was invested in Slovakia (only 2.9%). In the case of Hungary and Poland it was respectively 5.2% and 4.5% of the total funds. **All in all, in each of the Visegrad Group countries, the share of funds dedicated to the LEADER programme, in the general expenditures of the RDP, was lower than the average for the European Union (6.0%).**

In all of the Visegrad countries the largest pool of funds was allocated to the implementation of local development strategies (from 73.2% in the Czech Republic to 81.3% in Poland). At the same time, countries which are the subject of the study vary in the amount of funds allocated to the implementation of cooperation projects. From the total pool of funds dedicated to the LEADER approach the largest sum for such projects was used by Hungary (9.9%) and the Czech Republic (8.5%). In comparison to the other countries of the Visegrad Group, Poland spent the lowest amount (only 1.9%). Slovakia devoted 4.9% of the overall budget allocated to the LEADER programme. It is worth noting that, in comparison to Poland, Hungary spent almost twice as much on the implementation of cooperation projects despite having three times lower the amount of money dedicated to the LEADER approach. In each of the countries the share of funds allocated to LAG operating as well as activation and experience acquisition is at a similar level (from 15.8% in Hungary and Slovakia to 18.3% in the Czech Republic).

Another aspect of the LEADER approach implementation in the Visegrad countries, which is worth paying attention to, is the system of the programme implementation. The implementation of the RDP (and hence the LEADER approach) has been defined at the

European level (*Commission Regulation No 1698/2005*), however, in certain countries (e.g. in Poland) examples of adjustment to the specific national circumstances (e.g. legal and administrative) can be pointed out.

LAGs are the basis of the system of the LEADER mechanism implementation in all Member States of the European Union. They are assigned a series of tasks in the field of rural development policy. The main task of tri-sectoral partnerships is to develop and then to implement a LDS for the given area (particularly projects selection for funding). Nevertheless, apart from LAGs which operate on a local level, some other entities and institutions of central or regional level (e.g. in Poland) are involved in the implementation. Their task is to provide an appropriate legal and organizational framework for the implementation of the programme and exercise supervision and control over the functioning of partnerships (fig. 4.1).

Managing Authorities, which are responsible for programme management and its implementation in an efficient, effective and correct manner, play a primary role in the RDP implementation (and thus the LEADER mechanism). In the case of all Visegrad countries, a national ministries competent in the field of agriculture and rural development is

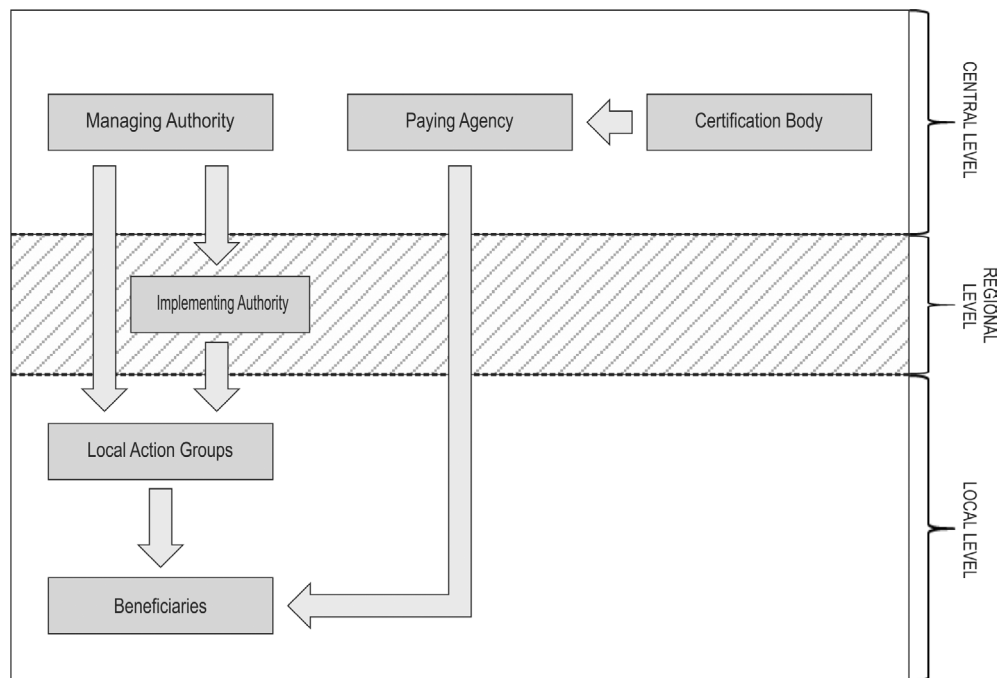


Fig. 4.1. A simplified diagram of the LEADER programme implementation in the Visegrad countries

Notes: Signature mark was used to indicate a regional level in implementing the LEADER programme that in present only in Poland

Source: the summary is based on the RDP 2007 – 2013 for the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary

considered as Managing Authority. **It should be noted that in Poland, as in the only one among the surveyed countries, the Managing Authority (The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development) transferred a substantial part of their powers to regional governments (Implementing Authority), thus forming an indirect (i.e. regional) level of the LEADER programme implementation.** Polish self-governments, represented by Marshall Offices, were mainly responsible for: selecting LAGs (through a contest) that would realise LDS, supervising activities of partnerships, monitoring and evaluating LDS introduction. In the rest of Visegrad Group countries these tasks were conducted by evaluation committees under the ministries competent in agriculture and rural development.

Paying Agencies and Certification Bodies are also important as far as the system of RDP implementation is concerned. The main competence of the first is to make payments to beneficiaries (applicants) who implement projects with the support of EAFRD while the second approves financial operations performed by Paying Agencies in terms of their accuracy and completeness (*Commission Regulation No 1290/2005*). The function of Paying Agencies for RPD, in all Visegrad countries, is performed by selected public entities responsible for the distribution of European funds for agricultural sector and rural areas (tab. 4.3). In Poland and the Czech Republic the following public entities are performing the function of Certification Bodies for RDP: General Inspector for Treasury Control in Poland and Supreme Audit Office in the Czech Republic. On the other hand, in Slovakia and Hungary this function is performed by private entities: Deloitte Audit Ltd. in Slovakia and KPMG Hungary Kft. in Hungary.

Tab. 4.3. Entities and institutions involved in the LEADER approach implementation in the Visegrad countries in 2007 – 2013

Type of entity	The Czech Republic	Poland	Slovakia	Hungary
Managing Authority	Ministry of Agriculture	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development	Ministry of Agriculture	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
Implementing Authority	none	Regional Governments	none	none
Paying Agency	State Agricultural Intervention Fund	The Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture	Agricultural Paying Agency	Agricultural and Rural Development Agency
Certification Body	Supreme Audit Office	General Inspector for Treasury Control	Deloitte Audit Ltd.	KPMG Hungary Kft.

Source: the summary is based on the RDP 2007 – 2013 for the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary and the data found on The European Network for Rural Development website (<http://enrd.ec.europa.eu>)

4.1.3. The results of the LEADER approach implementation in the Visegrad countries in 2007–2013

The question of the programme results cannot be omitted during the analysis of the LEADER approach in the Visegrad countries. One of the most important issues is the level of effectiveness of the LEADER programme implementation i.e. the degree of implementation of the project objectives. This section focuses primarily on quantitative aspects of the LEADER mechanism implementation in the Visegrad countries analyzing not only a number of created LAGs, their total area and a number of inhabitants, but also the use of funds allocated to the programme. The result indicator for this analysis is expressed as a percentage which represents the relationship between the actual value of the item and the value expected in the RDP 2007–2013. **It should be emphasized that in all Visegrad countries, the real effects of the LEADER approach implementation, with few exceptions, are much higher than those anticipated in the RDP at the beginning of the 2007–2013 programming period (tab. 4.4).** Given the number of created tri-sectoral partnerships, their total area and population, it is clear that the Visegrad countries are characterized by a high level of performance within the scope of the LEADER programme implementation. In each of these countries the LEADER approach implementation has proved to be a phenomenon far more widespread than originally expected.

In almost all of the countries of the Visegrad Group, apart from the Czech Republic, a number of established LAG is greater than that assumed in the RDP. However, it should be noted that in the case of the Czech Republic, the number of partnerships selected for

Tab. 4.4. Selected quantitative effects of the LEADER programme implementation in the Visegrad Group countries in 2007–2013 (valid for December 2013) in the light of the RDP objectives

Country	Number of LAGs		Overall area of LAGs		Total number of inhabitants in LAGs	
	In general	Result indicator [%]	In general [thous. km ²]	Result indicator [%]	In general [thousand people]	Result indicator [%]
The Czech Republic ^a	111	99.1	52.1	121.1	3,889.2	117.9
Poland	336	112.0	294.4	192.7	18,494.7	184.9
Slovakia	29	116.0	9.0	75.0	614.9	175.7
Hungary	95	190.0	86.3	209.9	4,479.8	179.2

^a It applies to 111 LAGs selected for funding in the framework of the RDP

Source: the summary is based on the RDP 2007–2013 for the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary and the data found on The European Network for Rural Development website (<http://enrd.ec.europa.eu>) and data gathered by the project partners

a financial support (111) is close to the RDP initial objectives (112). **Moreover, it should be noted that, apart from the mentioned above LAGs, the Czech Republic also houses groups whose activities are not directly financed from the EAFRD (in total, there are 59 such partnerships).** Among all the countries of the Visegrad Group the largest level of effectiveness in creating LAGs is seen in Hungary where the number of partnerships created (95) is nearly twice as high as originally assumed (50). As far as Poland and Slovakia is concerned, the aims regarding the number of LAGs were achieved and even exceeded. In Poland, at the end of 2013, a total number of 336 partnerships operated (RDP anticipated creation of 300 LAGs). **Poland is the country with the largest number of tri-sectoral partnerships not only in the Visegrad countries, but also among all member states of the European Union.** Among the countries concerned, Slovakia has the smallest number of partnerships realising the LEADER programme ideas – only 29 LAGs. However, we must remember that a small number of partnerships in Slovakia is an aftermath of this country's RDP (the document assumed that only 25 LAGs would be financed form EAFRD).

In most of the Visegrad countries, except Slovakia, the LEADER programme implementation covered a larger area than originally anticipated in the RDP. Similarly, as in the case of the number of tri-sectoral partnerships selected for support funding, in terms of the total area occupied by the LAGs, the highest index value has been observed in Hungary. In this country, the area where LEADER approach has been implemented is more than twice as large as the initial assumptions. The same situation is in Poland, the total area occupied by the partnership is much higher in relation to the RDP objectives (the index value is at the level of 192.7%). In the Czech Republic, function groups selected for the EAFRD funding cover the area which is greater than originally anticipated by about 20%. On the other hand, Slovakia was not able to reach the postulated size of the area for the LEADER programme. In this case, the total area covered by the partnerships is 25% smaller than that assumed in the RDP.

While comparing the area occupied by the LAGs in individual Visegrad countries it must be noted that these countries alter in terms of the tri-sectoral partnerships' coverage level of their territory. **In relation to the total area of the country, LAGs occupy the largest area in Poland and Hungary. In Poland, the local partnerships cover up to 94.2% territory of the country, while Hungary 92.7% respectively.** The smallest degree of coverage is noted by Slovakia, where the local partnerships occupy only 18.3% of the total area of the country. In the Czech Republic an area occupied by the LAGs receiving the support from the EAFRD constitutes 66.0% of the total territory. However, it is worth mentioning that in the Czech Republic there are groups that are not funded under the RDP. If those local partnerships are taken into account, LAGs in the Czech Republic cover about 90.0% of the country. **To sum up, in the case of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, the LEADER programme implementation in 2007–2013 is definitely a widespread phenomenon, while in Slovakia it applies to a relatively small part of the country.**

The fact that deserves a particular emphasis is that in all of the Visegrad countries the total number of people living within the LAGs (and thus benefiting from the effects of the projects implemented under RDP) is greater than expected at the beginning of the programming period (tab. 4.4). The initial RDP assumptions regarding the number of inhabitants of LAGs have been significantly exceeded in case of Poland (184.9%), but also Hungary (179.2%) and Slovakia (175.7%). In the Czech Republic, the number of people living in the area where groups selected for the EAFRD funding are operating is greater than that assumed in the RDP (that value equals to 117.9%). In addition, it must be remembered that in the Czech Republic there are also partnerships that do not directly benefit from EU support in the LEADER approach implementation. Accordingly, it should be emphasized that the actual effects of the LEADER programme in the relevant area of the Czech Republic are even higher.

Despite the high effectiveness of the RDP implementation objectives concerning the number of LAGs and their total area and population, the Visegrad countries, except the Czech Republic, are characterized by a relatively low level of usage of funds dedicated to the LEADER approach (tab. 4.5). The low efficiency in the usage of funds allocated to the LEADER programme is especially evident in comparison to the other RDP priority axes. However, the problem is not just about Visegrad countries, but is widely seen also in the other member states of the Community. Until the end of 2013, across the European Union, only 46.7% of public funds allocated to the LEADER mechanism implementation

Tab. 4.5. The use of funds allocated to the LEADER approach in the Visegrad Group countries in 2007 – 2013 (valid for December 2013) as compared to the other axes of the RDP [%]

RDP axis	The Czech Republic	Poland	Slovakia	Hungary
Axis 1. Improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector	71.6	75.3	78.5	65.8
Axis 2. Improving the environment and the countryside	86.5	82.5	90.5	77.3
Axis 3. Improving the quality of life in rural areas	70.9	54.5	75.6	52.4
Axis 4. LEADER	70.2	41.9	47.0	33.2
RPD in general	79.1	71.3	83.0	66.6

Notes: the summary covers all public funds (i.e. EAFRD funds and national public funds)

allocated to the LEADER programme implementation in the RDP 2007 – 2013

Source: the summary is based on the data found on The European Network for Rural Development website (<http://enrd.ec.europa.eu>)

were used. At the same time, the average level of use of funds involved in the RDP realisation in the EU countries amounted to 75.7%⁸.

Individual countries of the Visegrad Group are characterized by a distinct differentiation in terms of the effectiveness of the use of funds allocated to the LEADER programme. **Until the end of 2013, the Czech Republic managed to allocate by far the most funding to the LEADER approach implementation (70.2%). It is worth pointing out that the country was recognized as one of the leading nations of the European Union, taking the fifth place after Ireland, The Netherlands, Estonia and Austria in terms of this matter.** Among the Visegrad countries, the lowest level of effectiveness in the use of funds dedicated to the LEADER programme is marked by Hungary (only 33.2%). In the case of Slovakia and Poland, by the end of 2013, respectively 47.0% and 41.9% of total funding guaranteed for the LEADER approach implementation was spent.

The funds allocated to LAGs functioning were characterized by the highest utilisation ratio (from 58.6% in Poland to 71.9% in the Czech Republic). On the other hand, the use of funds allocated for cooperation projects implementation was the lowest. Apart from the Czech Republic, no other country, by the end of 2013, used more than 20% of the funds. Hungary spent by far the least of these funds (only 9.5%). In addition, except for the Czech Republic, no other surveyed country spent more than 50% of the funds allocated for development strategies implementation under the RDP.

4.1.4. Characteristics of LAGs in the Visegrad countries

LAGs in the Visegrad countries are clearly not uniform in terms of an occupied area, population and a number of members involved in their activities. This diversity is seen on both national and international level.

The first analyzed LAG diversity feature is an area occupied by each partnership. The size of the LAG area may be a significant factor influencing its activity. Considerable distances between partners within a group may hinder interaction, especially personal contacts which are crucial for the LEADER approach implementation (e.g. LAG general assembly or LAG board meeting aimed at choosing which projects should be financed). On the other hand, a geographical proximity associated with a smaller area of the LAG can contribute to frequent meetings and contacts of individual members of the partnership.

LAGs in the Visegrad countries are clearly not uniform in terms of occupied area. **Partnerships present in Hungary cover the highest average area (908.1 km²).** For Poland, it is 804.5 km². Compared to these countries, LAGs in the Czech Republic and Slovakia are substantially smaller in terms of area. In the Czech Republic the average area of one LAG is 469.1 km², while in Slovakia 310.2 km². **The presence of large partnerships, whose ter-**

⁸ The European Network for Rural Development website [<http://enrd.ec.europa.eu>].

territory exceeds 1,500 km² (tab. 4.6), is typical for Poland and Hungary. In the Czech Republic there is only one group which area is larger than 1,500 km², while in Poland there are 41 and in Hungary – 8. Slovakia, where the vast majority of LAGs are smaller than 500 km², lacks partnerships of this magnitude. In the case of this country, for 29 functioning LAGs only 5 of them are larger than 500 km². The largest Slovak partnership (LAG Horný Liptov) is 766.2 km². The Czech Republic is also clearly dominated by small tri-sectoral partnerships, however, in contrast to Slovakia, one can find there LAGs whose territory exceeds 1,000 km². In total, in the territory of the Czech Republic there are 7 such partnerships. The largest (LAG Vladař) covers an area equal to 1,757.0 km². In Poland and Hungary the most numerous group, though not dominant, ranges in size from 500 to 1,000 km². **Among the Visegrad countries, Hungary is a country with by far the lowest share of small-area partnerships.** Hungarian LAGs which cover an area of less than 500 km² represent only 17.9% of the total existing tri-sectoral partnerships. At the same time, in the case of this country, there are 5 groups that exceed 2,000 km². Hungary's largest-area partnership (LAG Bükk-Térségi) is 2,551.3 km². Poland's largest LAGs also occupy the area of more than 2,000 km² (in total, there are 19 such groups). The vast majority of large-area partnerships is located in the northern part of the country (Zachodniopomorskie, Pomorskie, Warmia-Mazury, Podlasie) because these areas are not densely populated. The largest Polish group (LAG Partnerstwo Dorzecze Słupi) covers an area equal to 4,184.1 km². In all of the V4 countries, the smallest LAGs cover approximately 100 km² (from 72.6 km² in Slovakia to 134.7 km² in the Czech Republic).

Tri-sectoral partnerships that function in the Visegrad countries also differ in terms of the number of municipalities making up of each LAG. However, this disparity is primarily due to the administrative divisions distinctive for each country. Poland's municipalities are significantly larger in terms of an area in comparison to the other countries. Thus, Poland has the lowest average number of municipalities per one LAG. In Poland, on average, there are 6 municipalities per one LAG, while in the Czech Republic and Hungary the numbers

Tab. 4.6. The structure of LAGs in the Visegrad countries according to occupied area

Area of LAG [km ²]	LAG structure according to the occupied area [%]			
	The Czech Republic ^a	Poland	Slovakia	Hungary
Less than 500	68.5	32.7	82.8	17.9
500–1000	26.1	36.6	17.2	47.4
1000–1500	4.5	18.5	0.0	26.3
1500–2000	0.9	6.5	0.0	3.2
More than 2000	0.0	5.7	0.0	5.3

^a It applies to 111 LAGs selected for funding in the framework of RDP

Source: the summary is based on the data gathered by the project partners

are respectively 36 and 32. In the case of Slovakia, there are usually 18 municipalities per one LAG. **It is also worth mentioning that Poland has LAGs that covers an area of only one municipality.** Despite the fact that these partnerships are rather uncommon (11 LAGs – 3,3% of the total number) the mere fact of their occurrence should be evaluated as negative. In the case of such LAGs, there is a much greater possibility that their activity will depend on the public sector, which is unlikely if partnerships consist of several or a dozen municipalities. In addition, the three-sector partnership that is limited only to the area of one municipality does not allow to fully implement the LEADER programme objectives in an effective and correct manner (*Ocena funkcionowania...* 2012). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in the new programming period (2014–2020) a creation of partnerships consisting exclusively of one municipality will not be possible. In accordance with the RDP objectives for 2014–2020, an area of each LAG in Poland must include at least two municipalities.

LAGs functioning in the Visegrad Group countries are also clearly different in terms of population. **The highest average number of inhabitants can be observed in Poland (50.5 thous.) and Hungary (47.2 thous.).** The smallest groups in terms of population can be seen in Slovakia, where the average number of people living within the borders of one partnership is 21.2 thousand people. In the Czech Republic, the average number of residents per LAG is 35.0 thousand people. **Among the Visegrad Group countries, Poland is the only country where partnerships of more than 100 thousand residents are common (tab. 4.7).** In the Czech Republic and Hungary there is only one such group. However, it should be underlined that the upper limit of the number of people living in the area of one LAG was set at 100 thousand people by the RDP regulations. In Slovakia, the biggest partnerships does not exceed 80 thousand although this country's RDP, as in Poland, allowed the creation of LAGs of up to 150 thousand residents. Most of Slovak LAGs consist of 10–20 thousand inhabitants. There are 29 Slovak groups but only 2 exceed 40 thousand in-

Tab. 4.7. The structure of LAGs according to population in the Visegrad countries

Population of LAG [thous.]	Structure of LAGs by population [%]			
	The Czech Republic ^a	Poland	Slovakia	Hungary
less than 20	27.0	8.0	62.1	5.3
20–40	39.6	28.6	31.0	32.6
40–60	21.6	23.8	3.4	42.1
60–80	7.2	21.1	3.4	13.7
80–100	3.6	11.3	0.0	5.3
more than 100	0.9	7.1	0.0	1.1

^a applies to 111 LAGs selected for funding from RDP

Source: the summary is based on the data gathered by the project partners

habitants. The most numerous partnership in Slovakia (LAG Naše Považie) is inhabited by 66.2 thousand people. In the case of the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, the largest partnerships range in size from 20 to 60 thousand residents. At the same time, Hungary and Poland are the countries with the lowest share of LAGs with a population of less than 20 thousand people. What is more, Poland, as previously mentioned, in comparison to the other countries of the Visegrad Group, stands out due to the fact that it has a relatively large number of groups inhabited by more than 100 thousand residents. In total, there are 24 such partnerships and the 2 largest ones (LGD Partnerstwo Dorzecze Słupi i Stowarzyszenie Światowid) has a population of just over 150 thousand inhabitants. In the case of Hungary and the Czech Republic the largest groups are populated by respectively 118.0 thousand (LAG Del-Nyírség Erdőspuszták) and 101.3 thousand (LAG Posazavi) inhabitants. In the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, the smallest LAG population is about 10 thousand, while in Hungary a little more – 16 thousand people. It should be noted that the number of inhabitants in tri-sectoral partnerships in the Visegrad countries is not fully correlated with the area occupied by each LAG, which is primarily due to the uneven distribution of population in those countries. The most evident relationship between population and area of LAG is seen in the case of Slovakia. The opposite situation is evident in Hungary.

Another matter is the number of members which is directly connected to the concept of representativeness of the particular sectors in a partnership structure. **The largest number of entities and persons engaged in the work of LAG can be observed in Hungarian partnerships, in the case of which one group consists of an average number of 93 members.** Poland, where an average number of members participating in the work of LAG is 73, was ranked the second just behind Hungary. On the other hand, Czech and Slovak tri-sectoral local partnerships, in comparison to the other two countries of the Visegrad Group, are characterized by significantly smaller number of members. The average number of entities and individuals involved in Slovak LAG is 47, while in the Czech Republic the number is 39. **It should be emphasized that in each of the countries there is a lack of clear correlation between the number of LAG members and the number of their inhabitants.** Thus, the involvement of local actors and local communities in tri-sectoral partnerships activities in the Visegrad countries does not depend on the critical mass, which is residents.

Among the countries surveyed, the greatest level of local community involvement in the activities of the LAG in relation to the number of inhabitants is in Slovakia and Hungary. In the case of these countries for every 10 thousand people living within the LAG there are on average 22 and 20 members of tri-sectoral partnerships. On the other hand, Poland and the Czech Republic have significantly lower values. In Poland, for every 10 thousand LAG inhabitants there are on average 13 members engaged in partnerships, while in the Czech Republic, respectively, 11.

The structure of LAGs according to the number of members in individual Visegrad countries alters significantly. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the most common part-

Tab. 4.8. The structure of LAGs in the Visegrad countries according to the number of members

Number of members of LAGs	Structure of LAGs acc. to the number of members [%]			
	The Czech Republic ^a	Poland ^b	Slovakia	Hungary ^c
less than 25	26.1	3.1	10.3	0.0
26–50	56.8	21.5	62.1	18.9
51–75	9.0	39.0	20.7	21.1
76–100	7.2	22.4	6.9	23.3
101–150	0.9	11.7	0.0	26.7
more than 150	0.0	2.5	0.0	10.0

^a applies to 111 LAGs selected for funding from RDP

^b applies to 326 LAGs (out of 336) which provided data on the number of members

^c applies to 90 LAGs (out of 95) which provided data on the number of members

Source: the summary is based on the data gathered by the project partners

nerships are those consisting of 26 to 50 members (tab. 4.8). It is quite frequent for the Czech Republic to have LAGs that consist of less than 25 members. In Hungary, such partnerships do not exist at all, while in Poland they contribute to the distinct minority (only 3.1%). **Moreover, in Poland and Hungary groups incorporating more than 100 members are seen on a broader scale.** In Hungary, the mentioned groups represent more than 1/3 of all partnerships. For comparison, in the Czech Republic there is only one group which involves more than 100 members (LAG Horn Pomorav), while in Slovakia the largest group (LAG Naše Považie) has 88 local actors. The largest partnership in the whole Visegrad Group is PROWENT (Partnerstwo dla Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich Ekonomia – Nauka – Tradycja – Partnership for the Development of Rural Areas Economy – Science – Tradition). A total number of up to 929 members is involved in this group’s activities (797 representatives come from the public sector).

LAGs functioning in the Czech Republic and Hungary are characterized by a highly balanced participation of representatives from each of the three sectors in the total number of members (tab. 4.9). In the case of Slovakia, a number of public sector representatives is slightly higher and, as a consequence, the number of economic sector representatives is lower. **In Poland, a distinct asymmetry in favour of the social sector can be observed.** However, it should be underlined that, in the case of Polish LAGs, the social sector is represented primarily not by NGOs, local associations, churches or religious associations but by natural persons⁹.

⁹ More detailed information on LAGs in Poland (including a research on the structure of members of the Polish tri-sectoral partnerships) can be found in chapter 5.

Tab. 4.9. The structure of LAG members in the Visegrad countries according to sectors

Sector	The structure of LAG members acc. to particular sectors [%]			
	The Czech Republic ^a	Poland ^b	Slovakia	Hungary ^c
public	33.6	14.2	41.5	33.7
economic	33.2	15.5	24.3	31.0
social	33.2	70.3	34.2	35.3

^a applies to 111 LAGs selected for funding from RDP

^b applies to 326 LAGs (out of 336) which provided data on the number of members

^c applies to 90 LAGs (out of 95) which provided data on the number of members

Source: the summary is based on the data gathered by the project partners

4.2. The implementation of the LEADER approach in the Visegrad countries (qualitative analysis)¹⁰

The European LEADER mechanism, as every spatial phenomenon, has a diverse specificity within the area in which it functions. Various international factors have a significant influence on the implementation of this mechanism in each country. System solutions at a national level not only play an important role in shaping an overall, i.e. expressed by figures, image of the mechanism, but also determine quality characteristics of Visegrad countries, despite the geographical proximity, differ in terms of qualitative characteristics of the LEADER mechanism implementation. This is mostly influenced by, apart from the aforementioned national level solutions and, the most frequently mentioned, social capital, demographic (e.g. density of population, a number of inhabitants of a rural area) and spatial factors (e.g. a structure and density of settlement network), provided that they determine the mentioned system solutions. It can be stated that specificity determinants of the mechanism generally affect its local characteristic. Similarly, the image of the mechanism expressed in quantitative data is reflected in its qualitative perception.

Local and regional aspects cannot be ignored in the case of qualitative analyses. Those aspects decide about the uniqueness of certain processes which subsequent aggregation provides more or less mixed picture of the phenomenon at the national level.

As far as aforementioned is concerned, the experience of the Visegrad Group countries in implementing the LEADER mechanism has twofold specificity: on the one hand regarding top-down features and system solutions and on the other hand due to local (regional) specificities of these countries.

¹⁰ On the basis of information provided by: M. Trantinová (The Czech Republic), A. Eröss (Hungary), E. Sykała (Poland), J. Hámorník, T. Čičová, R. Vajčíková, V. Rybár and M. Buday (Slovakia).

4.2.1. Methodology

The qualitative analysis of Visegrad Group countries experience was expert research, had a multi-stage character in which consecutive phases formed a logical whole. Apart from literature review and website query, the research was based on field observations. The research methodology was created regarding optimisation and adaptation issues of the LEADER approach implementation in Georgia. Particular stages of the research were designed to identify any ideas of the LEADER approach in Visegrad countries that can be transferred to Georgia. The ideas were chosen according to the socio-economic specificity of Georgian rural areas and concerning their possible contribution to eliminating development deficits of Georgian villages as well as threats that can result in significant dysfunction of the approach.

The aim of the first stage of the study was to perform a two-dimensional analysis of the key features of the LEADER approach. The first of these dimensions included a numerical evaluation for each of characteristic in each of the Visegrad countries, while the second aimed at a selection of positive and negative examples of activities and assign them with “pluses” and “minuses”. The second stage involved localisation, observation and description of the activities of LAGs which can be examples of the best practices in implementation of both the mechanism and the approach (a description of selected activities of Polish, Czech, Hungarian and Slovak LAGs can be found in boxes). The third and the last step involved an analysis of the key advantages and disadvantages of the LEADER mechanism in the Visegrad countries (fig. 4.2).

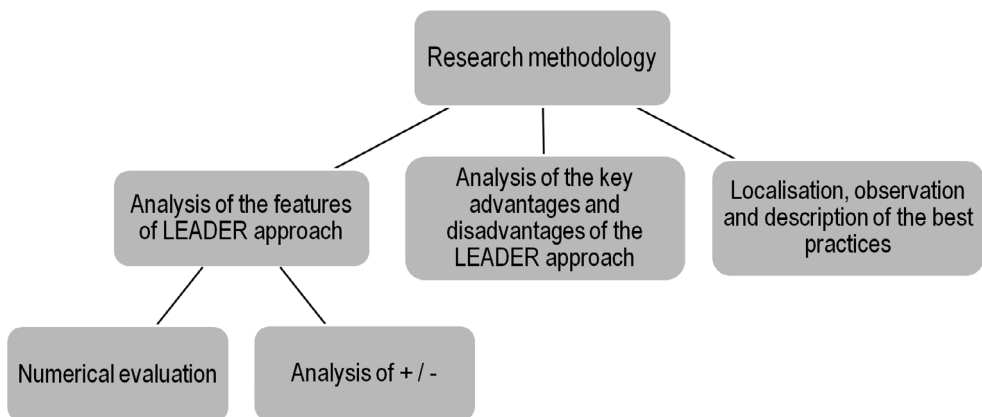


Fig. 4.2. The research methodology of the LEADER mechanism / approach in the Visegrad countries

Source: own work

4.2.2. Analysis of key features of the LEADER approach

The numeric evaluation system of key features of the LEADER helped to identify patterns regarding each particular feature among the Visegrad countries. The rating ranged from 1 (representing the highest note) to 7 (representing the lowest note) (tab. 4.10).

An integrated approach, which involved an execution of multiple different actions (as opposed to the traditional sectoral policies), is best in Poland (mark: 3) and the worst in Hungary (almost the lowest mark: 6).

Cooperation, understood as the actual interaction in order to achieve a real goal, was given the mark of 3 in the Czech Republic and Slovakia but a similar mark (4) was awarded to Polish and Czech LAGs. In the opinion of experts, cooperation between sectors presents a lower performance, though only in the case of LAGs functioning in Hungary and the Czech Republic where this feature was marked respectively 6 and 4.

A common and undesirable feature of LAG activity is a lack of innovation. Czech LAGs gained the best mark in this category (4) even though it is still rather average achievement. The other countries were given 5. As far as experts are concerned, the bottom-up approach utilization (i.e. implementation of the ideas provided by local communities) is quite unsatisfactory. Slovakia was given the highest mark (3) while the Czech Republic – 4, Poland and Hungary – 5.

The distinguishing feature of Polish LAGs is their ability to form relationships (2). It should be noted that LAGs functioning in other countries were also successful in this matter, having received the mark of 3, which – apart from territoriality – can be considered as a determinant feature of The LEADER mechanism in the Visegrad countries. This territorial approach, expressed primarily by the forming of LDS in accordance with a local

Tab. 4.10. Numerical evaluation of key features of the LEADER mechanism / approach in the Visegrad countries

Key feature	Country			
	The Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
Integrated approach	6	5	3	4
Cooperation	3	4	4	3
Innovativeness	4	5	5	5
Relationship forming	3	3	2	3
Bottom-up approach	4	5	5	3
Partnership approach (tri-sectoral approach)	4	6	4	3
Territorial approach	2	3	2	2

Source: own work based on information provided by project partners

specificity, is considered the most successful feature of V4 countries. Apart from Hungary, where the approach received 3, all other countries were awarded 2.

It should be underlined that the experts did not award the highest mark (1) and “2” appeared only four times. (Most features were given 3 – nine times, 4 was given seven times, 5 appeared six times and 6 only two times). The lowest mark (7) did not appear at all. This is the consequence of the fact that the highest mark – even in the European countries of similar socio-economic level – it is practically impossible to receive the highest mark in any feature of the mechanism at the macroscale. This does not mean, however, that there are no Local Action Groups functioning at the highest level in terms of particular features but its performance can be observed only at micro- and medium scale. The above conclusions clearly shows that during the transfer of knowledge and experience of the Visegrad Group countries to Georgia, it is necessary not only to develop a standard which would be based on the macroscale evaluation of the LEADER mechanism (even through the prism of each of its seven key features) but also it must be supported by an analysis of the identified capital of each LAG.

As far as the creation of LEADER mechanism/approach in Georgia is concerned, it is worth considering the positive aspects of each of its key features in V4 which are the most “convincing” i.e. those which implementation, despite long-term effects, will bring also directly measurable benefits. This statement results from previous research conducted by the Institute of Urban Development which points at a short-term development perspective adapted by both, entities involved in improving the social and economic situation in Georgia and Georgian community. Although an innovative approach seems to be the perfect engine for broader changes in the Georgian villages (especially in the context of the observe difficulties in the actual decentralization of power and budget), there is a risk that its adaptation may exceed the local potential. Nevertheless, such a mechanism performed well, was tested in V4 countries which we see as a good omen in the case of Georgia.

Having in mind the aforementioned conclusion it should be stated that the multi-sectoral initiatives should focus primarily on the activation of entrepreneurship, just as it happened in Poland. A substantial support towards the agricultural sector, negatively perceived in Poland, will be received in a very positive way in Georgia. At the same time, cross-sectoral partnerships, implemented on the basis of transparent model of accountability, can lower the risk related to new projects and undertakings. It was confirmed by the activity of LAGs in the Czech Republic.

This seems particularly important from the perspective of Georgian village, where the emergence of new initiatives is often suppressed by the fear that the risk of the project failure is too high. Particular solutions, regardless of the fact that they come from top to bottom or are formed by LAGs, should be promoted (in the Czech Republic, the promotion of the good practices contributes to the creation of new ideas which are not only the source of new projects but also proved to be more effective “in practice”). All in all, the experience

of V4 countries shows that it is beneficial to transfer power to those entities that know the local specificity. According to the Institute of Urban Development research, Georgia has many different entities that possess the knowledge and potential to become a local leader. In the LEADER model dedicated for Georgia, this issue is particularly important due to the fact that the country, in spite of being rather small, is highly diversified both in terms of a natural landscape and socio-infrastructure. It is obvious that those characteristic features must be included in LDS. What is more, it is necessary to provide Georgia with Visegrad Group experience included in their LDS e.g. an extensive methodology of development and evaluation, being in line with LEADER programme objectives and development needs and local community involvement.

Good practise no. 1. Local Action Group Šluknovsko (Místní akční skupina Šluknovsko), Career Counselling Centre “Střelnice”, northern Czech Republic

The territory of operation of LAG Šluknovsko is a border area between Czech and Germany, called the Šluknov Hook (Šluknovský výběžek). It is an area characterized by a high percentage of unemployment – especially the long-term unemployment.

The main goal of the Career Counselling Centre “Střelnice” project was the professional activation of the region’s citizens. During the project, 20 out of 24 people, taking part in the project and staying unemployed for more than 5 months, managed to retrain in accordance with the market needs. With the cooperation of the local entrepreneurs, with the financial support of the European Social Fund and the Human Capital Operational Programme, 5 new workplaces have been created.

On this occasion bottom-up approach and innovation of action should be mentioned. While the Visegrad countries do not have a high level of implementation of these components of the LEADER mechanism, they still can “offer” an effective, in the context of Georgia, solution which is a centralised, at the national level, system of applying for funds. The example of Hungary shows that such a solution is helpful to Local Action Groups which are not creative enough and do not possess the skills needed to act independently while forming local development priorities. However, it must be emphasised that “top-down” system of application, which forces adaptation to the objectives defined outside of the area of LAG, can interfere with the bottom to top idea of the LEADER mechanism. We recommend diversifying the priorities into local and national. An ongoing reform in the Geor-

gian agricultural sector is a perfect example of the central programme which LAGs could be part of. Georgian activities, aimed at modernisation of this sector, are supposed to transfer the executive power from the central level to the regional level. It can be assumed that, in view of the fact that Georgia is on the threshold of actual (i.e. administrative, organizational and financial) decentralisation, similar solutions introduced by the government will be repeated.

Good practise no. 2. “Synergy” Association (Szinergia Egyeslet), “Don’t Be a Kept Man” Programme, south-western Hungary

The Association operates in one of the lowest-developed areas of Hungary, the economy of which is based on agriculture and which at the same time is one of the areas most densely populated by the Roma people.

The project, realised in the village of Cserdi, was set to confront the great assimilation difficulties, which the Roma people living there very often failed to overcome. The programme has been initiated by the village’s mayor, who is also a Roma. The main goal of the programme was to create the living conditions that would “discourage” the marginalised Roma community people from conducting delinquencies, and also encourage them to take up work. These goals were realised by employing the community in agriculture. As a consequence, members of these communities not only have an obligation to fulfil, but most of all they see their goal, as the produced food is being used to provide for the community. Food surplus created by one community are being distributed to others, which is how the Roma people are gaining experience of being not only a beneficiary, but also as a donor, which has special educational values in the context of their functioning in the social landscape.

Creating links between LAGs in Georgia, which naturally results not only from the LEADER model implementation but also from the entire European policy in this country, is a matter of the more distant future. A similar situation occurs as far as local governments are concerned due to the ongoing process of formation of new local authorities. These will now possess the real power (not delegated from the central level) which is associated with the possibility of determination of their own budgets. Although, their potential of establishing partnerships is difficult to assess.

The implementation of the LEADER mechanism/approach, however, could not be developed without taking the negative experience into account. From the perspective of

Visegrad countries, experts drew special attention to the dysfunction of the partnership approach (public-private) and cooperation resulting from: 1) the fact that the most frequent direct beneficiary of received funds under the LEADER is the public sector and 2) the dominant role of the public sector, and marginalization of the business sector involvement, in shaping and implementation of partnerships. From the perspective of the current events in Georgia, these observations show quite obvious risk.

Good practise no. 3. Partnership for the Local Action Group Terchovská dolina (Partnerstvo pre MAS Terchovská dolina), Playground in the Teplička nad Váhom village, northern Slovak Republic

The aim of the project was to provide the young citizens of the village with proper, safe recreation and playing conditions. It was also an answer to the growing need for such space, which was a result of an increasing number of the area's citizens. At the same time, this place also serves the family integration function, for it contains the "parent centre" as its part.

This building, apart from having a multi-function room, also contains a dining room and toilets fitted to meet the needs of the youngest and mothers with infants.

The park, apart from the accessories characteristic of playgrounds, also includes the artificial turf soccer pitch, and tartan-surfaced fields. The playground provides safety and hygiene of children play and care.

An implementation of the local government reform is in progress. It is – besides the actual transfer of competences from central to local level – an important step towards social and economic growth. Nonetheless, it carries the risk of realisation of not the local development priorities but the ideas and ambitions of this sector representatives. At the same time, resulting from limited range of competences of the public sector, the social one has been gaining more and more importance in the context of both stimulating the pro-development initiatives and animation of inhabitants and, consequently, social acceptance. It must be noted that the LEADER-type mechanism which would function on the same or similar terms – if implemented – could become a "gateway" for representatives of the public sector. It would enable them to keep their attitude, expressed in "we are doing what we are supposed to do", being in possession of external funds. In our opinion, it should be in NGOs' or local entrepreneurs' authority to be the leading component which would bond potential LAGs in Georgia. In the first place, an attention should be drawn to the potential of this type of organisation in Georgia. In our studies, we have identified many such entities which

can be described as highly efficient and – what is the most important – having significant social and human capital which is lacking in the public sector.

In territoriality, which is one of the best functioning features of the LEADER mechanism in the V4 countries, experts also pointed out an important, from the perspective of Georgian regional specificity, flaw. Namely, the analysis of Local Development Strategies for LAGs in Poland showed the mutual similarity of these strategies in general. It can be assumed that it is the result of learning from the best practices and their copying in favor of generally understood “greater good”, however, it is less probable than the idea that the LEADER is used as a tool for realisation of very similar – on a country scale – objectives (it is widely believed that the village in Poland is handicapped in terms of infrastructure; similarly, some “hard” investments are extremely common in rural areas, for example rural community centres; and finally, a typical feature present in the mentality of residents of rural areas is the desire to possess what their neighbour has (Sykała, Dej, Wolski 2015)) which could and often should be implemented from some other sources of funding. The causes of the mutual similarity of LDS must therefore be sought regarding that fact. The aforementioned situation should be avoided while implementing the LEADER approach in Georgia. Regional disparities, resulted from different socio-economic conditions, should be put forward as a main argument. In the situation of spatial differentiation of developmental needs – including those that can be accommodated within the framework of the LEADER – rejection of the territorial approach seems unjustified. (Of course, there are needs and priorities common for all rural areas in Georgia, a thoughtless reproduction of certain concepts should not be practiced).

4.2.3. Best practice

During the implementation of new solutions it is required to be able to gain experience and ideas and allow for their free flow. The presentation of best practices is very often very important material, not even serving as training, but more as a mobilisation and activation of the local community, as pointed out by the members of our seminar. All the more, considering the fact that as long as Georgia is not a member state of the EU, they will not commonly use the approach compatible with the LEADER. The potential Local Action Groups working according to this approach – in the case of implementing the mechanism/approach – will, as it is thought, be separate instances of developmental innovation. Contrary to appearances, it is not an unfavourable situation. The best patterns, especially these coming from the experience of the Visegrad Group, can be transferred above all to the most resourceful in terms of human capital, so sparse in the Georgian rural areas, and to the most interested LAGs or quasi-LEADER organisations (depending on the level of mechanism/approach implementation). Then, the aforementioned units will not only be the first beneficiary of the knowledge and experience exchange, but also the first, national units

responsible for further development of the LEADER idea in Georgia. It is worth mentioning that there is – seemingly – the need to implement the pilot programme in Georgia in such a way, that the “learning” process of the activation activities of this kind, despite the number of difficulties, which – due to the differences in the socio-economic development and legally-administrative functioning – are unavoidable, was optimised as fast as possible.

Good practise no. 4. Local Action Group “Warmiński Zakątek”, Act Locally (Działaj Lokalnie) programme, north-eastern Poland

The LAG serves as a centre for the “Act Locally” programme, which supports the initiatives undertaken by the citizens of small villages. It is a programme of the Polish-American Freedom Foundation realised since the year 2000 by the Academy for the Development of Philanthropy in Poland.

It must be said that in is one of main programmes which the LAG takes part in and which exceeds the actions covered by the LEADER programme. A high level of “non-leader” activity of the “Warmiński Zakątek” is especially worth mentioning as a feature of this LAG. It proves that Local Action Groups, once activated, can and are able to become well-functioning catalyst groups for various initiatives, accumulating the benefits of such initiatives.

Aside from the aforementioned “Act Locally” programme, the LAG is also conducting projects under the Human Capital OP, ROP of the Varmian-Masurian Voivodeship, the Civic Initiatives Fund and, interestingly, under the Polish Developmental Cooperation (project realised in Ukraine).

Furthermore, the LAG also fulfils the cooperation projects, including the international cooperation. Together with the “Brama Mazurskiej Krainy” LAG, and the Swedish Leader Blekinge Group, it realises the project called “Cross-border Entrepreneurs Blekinge – Warmia-Mazury.”

4.2.4. Key LEADER mechanism/approach advantages and disadvantages analysis

As mentioned before, the last stage of the analysis included the part devoted to the most important advantages and disadvantages of the LEADER in the Visegrad Group countries (tab. 4.11). This stage allowed for the display of two important issues. The first one, the mechanism/approach advantages – meaning these positive changes that it started or strengthened in Czech, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary – are an answer to the developmen-

Tab. 4.11. Most important advantages and flaws of the LEADER programme in the Visegrad Group countries

	Czech	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
Advantages	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Strengthening human capital 2) Existence of independent national Local Action Group network 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Creating a new cooperation field 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) High number of Local Action Groups (the highest in the European Union) 2) Local Action Groups involvement in pro-development activities outside of the LEADER programme 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Prospering tri-section partnerships 2) Using new methods and tools in the decision-making process 3) Real influence on the economy (local/regional), e.g. development of tourism, creating new workplaces 4) Increase of rural area attractiveness
Flaws	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) No knowledge on the subsidies 2) Low level of trust and mutual trust between the subjects of the socio-economic growth process 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Insufficient level of economic sector involvement 2) No PR actions or promotion, limited information on the PEADER programme 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Administrative programme implementation barriers 2) Low programme and Local Action Groups recognisability (low promotion and no PR actions) 3) Functioning of Local Action Groups covering only one municipality (3%) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Low number of Local Action Groups and low covered space 2) Insufficient participation level in implementing integrated projects 3) Risk of dissolving Local Action Groups due to financial reasons 4) Favouring the public sector in allocating financial resources 5) No proper evaluation mechanisms for the Local Development Strategies

Source: own work based on information provided by project partners

tal needs of the Georgian village. The second one, The disadvantages, or dysfunctions of LEADER, present in the V4 countries, represent the potential flaws in the case of implementing it in Georgia if related to the current specificity of this country and its social and administrative conditions. This negative – from the perspective of popularising the LEADER approach – conclusion confirms, though, that the “Visegrad” socio-economic development conditions are not as distant from the Georgian conditions, as it may be thought, thus confirming the validity of the conducted study.

Special attention, when it comes to the positive sides of LEADER, has been placed by experts upon the actual influence of this mechanism on the local/regional economy and the use of new methods and tools in the decisive process (Slovakia), involvement of Local Action Groups in other initiatives, reaching beyond the LEADER programme (Poland), creating a new cooperation field (Hungary), and strengthening the human capital (Czech). All these features of the programme are highly demanded in the context of the needs and actions necessary to improve the social situation and economic growth (in the local scale) of Georgia. When it comes to the dysfunctions of the programme in the countries of the Visegrad Group, the Georgian specificity makes a fertile ground for the existence of the following features: low level of mutual understanding between the subjects of the socio-economic development (the problem identified in Hungary), administrative barriers (Poland), and creating Local Action Groups in order to gain an extra donation sources, not for the purposes of the programme and the subjects (Slovakia). It can be seen here that, on the basis of the field research conducted, interviews with the representatives of extra-governmental organisations and companies offering developmental help in Georgia, the wrong implementation of the LEADER mechanism creates the risk not only of its failure, but also it could have the effect reverse to the original. In order to avoid this mistake, it should be first ensured that there is proper adaptation of the mechanism to the legislation and administrative conditions of Georgia. There is also the need for implementing the real, two-stage LAG activity evaluation system – one having the outer attribute (realisation of the intended goals evaluation) and the inner attribute (functioning in the financial perspective and influence on the local/regional development evaluation).

4.3. Summary

In the programming period 2007–2013 the main principles and objectives of the LEADER approach implementation has been strongly unified at the Community level. However, individual EU countries differ as far as specific, detailed rules of the implementation and realisation are concerned. It depends on specific development conditions different for individual countries (e.g. legal and administrative context, specifics of rural areas, etc.). The mentioned differences are apparent also in the case of the Visegrad Group countries and include both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the implementation of the LEADER approach.

Due to the different size, the Visegrad Group countries are clearly differentiated in terms of the amount of funding that was allocated for the LEADER approach implementation in 2007–2013. However, in each of the surveyed countries, the share of these funds in general expenditures of the RDP was below the European Union average (tab. 4.12). **The analysed countries also adopted different criteria for tri-sectoral partnerships creation (i.e. the maximum permissible number of inhabitants within one LAG and the exclusion of certain areas from LDS), which should be considered as a manifestation of adapting**

Tab. 4.12. Results of the LEADER approach in the Visegrad countries in 2007 – 2013

Feature	The Czech Republic	Poland	Slovakia	Hungary
The share of expenditure for the implementation of the LEADER approach in overall spending of RDP against the EU average.	below average (5.6%)	below average (4.5%)	below average (2.9%)	below average (5.2%)
The level of achievement of implementation results of the LEADER approach assumed in the RDP (the number of LAGs, the area of LAGs, the number of inhabitants in LAGs)	high (the projected values for the area and population of LAGs are exceeded) ^a	very high (the projected values of all three implementation results are exceeded)	high (the projected values for the amount and population of LAGs are exceeded)	very high (the projected values of all three implementation results are exceeded)
The level of coverage of the country by LAGs	very high (circa 90%) ^b	very high (over 90%)	very low (below 20%)	very high (over 90%)
The level of utilisation of the EAFRD funds dedicated to the LEADER approach against the EU average	high (70.2%)	average (41.9%)	average (47.0%)	low (33.2%)
The area covered by LAGs	predominance of small surfaced LAGs (less than 500 km ²) ^a	clear differentiation in terms of covered area, large surfaced LAGs are present on a wide scale (more than 1500 km ²)	significant predominance of small surfaced LAGs (less than 500 km ²)	clear differentiation in terms of covered area, large surfaced LAGs are present on a wide scale (more than 1500 km ²)

Feature	The Czech Republic	Poland	Slovakia	Hungary
The number of inhabitants in LAGs	predominance of lightly populated LAGs (less than 40 thousand inhabitants) ^a	clear differentiation in terms of number of inhabitants in LAGs, highly populated LAGs are present on a wider scale (more than 100 thousand inhabitants)	significant predominance of lightly populated LAGs (less than 40 thousand inhabitants)	clear differentiation in terms of number of inhabitants in LAGs
The number of members of LAGs	predominance of LAGs that have a small number of members (less than 50) ^a	clear differentiation in terms of a number of members in LAGs	predominance of LAGs that have a small number of members (less than 50)	clear differentiation in terms of a number of members in LAGs, LAGs that have a large number of members are present on a wider scale (more than 150)
The structure of members of LAGs	balanced (all sectors have virtually equal share) ^a	asymmetric (clear domination of social sector – mainly natural persons)	balanced (all sectors have virtually equal share)	balanced (all sectors have virtually equal share)

^a It applies to 111 LAG selected for funding in the framework of RDP

^b It applies to all LAGs (i.e. selected and non-selected for funding in the framework of the RDP)

Source: own work based on 2007 – 2013 RDP for The Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary and also other data found on The European Network for Rural Development website [<http://enrd.ec.europa.eu>] and data collected by the project partners

the objectives defined at European level to the specifics of the settlement system of the countries. Although the Visegrad countries have a similar system for implementing the LEADER approach, Poland is distinguished by the presence of intermediate (regional) level of the programme implementation. In Poland, a number of competences, normally governed by the Managing Authority, are shifted towards the regional governments which act as Implementing Authorities.

In the case of all countries of Visegrad Group, the actual values of implementation results of the LEADER approach (the number of established LAGs, their total area and

population), with few exceptions, are clearly higher than those assumed in the RDP of individual countries. Thus, the LEADER programme implementation in the Visegrad countries appeared to be far more widespread than originally anticipated. Those results were exceeded, to the greatest extent, in Hungary and Poland. It is worth noting that in the Czech Republic, apart from LAGs directly benefiting from EAFRD support, there are partnerships which have not been selected for funding under the RDP. Visegrad Group countries, except for Slovakia, are characterised by a very high level of coverage of their territory by tri-sectoral partnerships. In the case of Slovakia, the low value of this indicator is derived from a small number of established LAGs which is a consequence of regulations present in their RDP. Visegrad Group countries are characterized by a significant diversity in terms of effectiveness of funds spending allocated for the implementation of the LEADER approach. Until the end of 2013, the most funds allocated for the implementation of the LEADER programme were spend in in the Czech Republic and due to that fact this country was recognised as one of the leading nations of the European Union as far as this quality is concerned.

LAGs that operate in the Visegrad countries are clearly heterogeneous in terms of occupied area, population and the number of members involved in their activities. However, despite these differences, there is a number of features that is characteristic for tri-sectoral partnerships in particular countries. In Slovakia there are groups that can be described as small in terms of area, population and a number of members. In the Czech Republic the aforementioned partnerships are also in majority, however, their number is not as significant as in the case of Slovakia. Polish and Hungarian LAGs are characterised by a much greater diversity in respect of each of the analysed features. At the same time, the average area, population and number of members of LAGs in these countries is much higher than in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Moreover, in Poland and in Hungary, large partnerships (with an area of more than 1500 km²) are seen on a much broader scale. Additionally, in Poland there is more largely populated LAGs (more than 100 thousand inhabitants) than in the other countries. Finally, in comparison to the other countries of the V4 group, Poland has an asymmetric structure of LAGs members. Polish partnerships are clearly dominated by members representing the social sector (mainly natural persons).

As far as experts (project partners) are concerned, among the seven key features of the LEADER approach, in the case of Visegrad countries, territorial approach and the creation of links are mostly focused during the implementation while innovation stimulating and integrated approach are focused the least. According to the experts from various countries, among the most important benefits of the LEADER programme implementation in the Visegrad countries are strengthening of human capital (the Czech Republic), the creation of new areas of cooperation (Hungary), the involvement of LAGs in various pro-development initiatives undertaken outside the LEADER approach (Poland), the application of new methods and tools in decision-making, the actual impact on local and re-

gional economies and the improvement of rural areas attractiveness (Slovakia). At the same time, the project partners underscored the most serious barriers (faults) of the LEADER programme implementation. Among the listed problems there are: low level of trust between the parties involved in the development process (Czech Republic), insufficient level of business sector involvement (Hungary), small programme recognition and insufficient promotion (Hungary and Poland), barriers of an administrative nature (Poland), low level of participation in integrated projects and placing public sector in a privileged position while allocating funds (Slovakia).

The experience of the Visegrad countries associated with the implementation of the LEADER approach, summarized in the form of best practices included in this chapter, show that this mechanism, irrespectively of certain barriers or dysfunctions, may be an effective method for rural development which positively affects an area and benefits local communities.

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