

The Networks of Austrian and Czech Local Action Groups within the Frame of LEADER

G. Laister and H. K. Wyrzens¹

Abstract - Local action groups (LAGs) and the associated networks are key players in European rural development because they can decisively influence regions and the allocation of subsidies. These rural networks create benefits and focus on capacity building in the population. The aim of this work is to analyse social characteristics of Austrian and Czech LAGs that are mostly based on different historical backgrounds and to explicate a dissimilar working style and self-perception of these LAG-networks. Therefore the data of a survey of 26 LAGs in Austria and the Czech Republic is used.

INTRODUCTION

The improvement of regions is a main goal of European rural development policy. Therefore the programme LEADER (French: Liaison entre actions développement de l'économie rurale) was implemented in 1991 and at the present it is the fourth axis of European rural development policy and contemporaneously a measure across the other three axes. It introduced a new approach into rural development by focusing on mobilising rural actors, supporting new ideas, improving rural life, knowledge and skills, and fostering innovation and innovative approaches on the local level (Lee et al., 2005). In order to achieve the programme's goals it redistributes financial assets and power to the local level, more precisely to LAGs. As a by-product of actions also social capital arises that facilitates successful cooperation and the attaining of goals (Nardone et al., 2010) and that social capital is located and inherited in these networks. Hence this contribution focuses on LAGs and the importance of networks and networking, which are an essential base for the development of a region.

The composition, goals, and functioning of LAGs is dissimilar in Western and Eastern Europe due to the countries' historical and cultural backgrounds (Kováč, I. and Kučerová, 2006). Especially the Communistic area heavily influenced the peculiarities of networks and thus created a society with strong vertical ties between the party and individuals (Fukuyama, 2000). So this work delves into subsequent questions:

- How are the particular networks of local action groups in Austria and the Czech Republic composed?

- How do the involved managing authorities perceive the cooperation in the LAG?

INITIAL ASSUMPTIONS AND METHODS

All LAGs fulfil an important task in European rural development but in public they appear dissimilar in terms of their main emphasis and cooperation between the members. Some of them focus strongly on public relations, some actively push certain themes and measures in a region and others mostly administer applications for a subsidy and give advice. But the density and structure of social networks as well as some other factors have – through social capital – great influence on how the cooperation is shaped, sustained and extended (cf. Huang and Newell, 2003). Denser and smaller networks can lead more easily to higher efficiency in the decision making process and to better cooperation that is widely free of conflict.

Due to the fact that a social grid is strongly influenced by culture and history in March 2011 a survey was conducted in altogether 26 Austrian and Czech LAGs (n=14 in Austria – in the Mühlviertel, Waldviertel, and Weinviertel, n=12 in the Czech Republic – in the most southern LAGs of Jihočeský kraj, Kraj Vysočina, and Jihomoravský kraj) in order to focus on country-specific characteristics. These LAGs were selected because of their location in the border region of the particular country and the associated, antecedent similar development of the neighbouring regions (prior to the post war history of the two countries). The data was gathered in the form of personal interviews using an interviewer-administered questionnaire in order to receive comparable data and maximise the return rate. Subsequently the data was analysed by descriptive statistics using SAS and by documentary evidence.

RESULTS

In Austria LEADER was first introduced in 1996 and hence about 8 years earlier than in the Czech Republic but the mean values of the founding years of Austrian and Czech LAGs in the present survey is quite close to each other (Austria: 2003.43; Czech Republic: 2004.58). Differences are evident in structural characteristics of the LEADER regions where LAGs are operating (see Table 1) as well as in the construction of LAGs (see Table 2). In a Czech community in the survey area live on average about only 30% of people as in an Austrian community. Also the average number of residents in the exam-

¹ Günther Laister writes his doctoral thesis at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna (laister@gmx.at).

Hans Karl Wyrzens works at the Institute for Sustainable Economic Development at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna (hans_karl.wyrzens@boku.ac.at).

ined Austrian LEADER regions is more than twice as high compared to the Czech situation. Further differences are obvious in the organisational structure of the LAGs (see Table 2).

Table 1. Characteristics of LEADER regions.

Mean value of characteristics of LEADER regions	Austria, n=14	Czech Republic, n=12
Number of communities	24.14	33.42
Number of residents	54,292.86	26,250.00
Ratio: people per community	2,249.05	785.22

Table 2. Characteristics of LAGs.

Mean value of characteristics of LAGs	Austria, n=14	Czech Republic, n=12
Number of employees	1.7	2.8
Number of meetings of the selection committee per year	3.3	3.6
Number of members of the selection committee	16.78	6.75

Apparently Czech LAGs employ about one person more than their Austrian counterparts. The number of meetings of the selection committee that decides about the granting of a subsidy to a project or an applicant is quite similar in both countries. Here the lowest number was found in Austria (one LAG had zero meetings per year for making decisions because they exclusively use the intranet for that purpose) and in the Czech Republic one group had nine meetings on average per year. The difference in the numbers of the selection committees' members (16.78 in Austria and 6.75 in the Czech Republic) is even significant (t-test: $0.0007 < \text{level of significance } 0.01$ and therefore we can conclude that the mean values differ significantly).

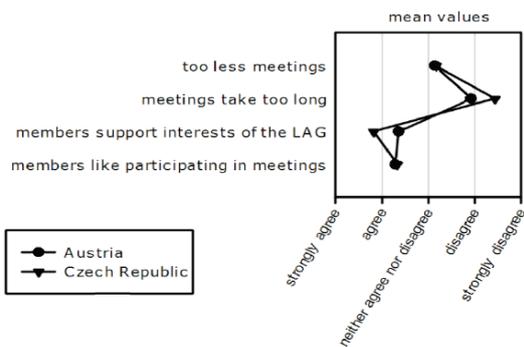


Figure 1. Perception of the LAG-network by managing authorities (selected factors).

Figure 1 depicts the situation how some selected network-factors are estimated by the managing authorities of the LAGs. These results show that the networks are perceived to operate slightly better in the Czech Republic and the members seem to support the interests of the LAG stronger. This work demonstrates that a cross-national comparison is under certain circumstances possible although some authors mention that science disclaims them (Gehmacher, 2009).

DISCUSSION AND OUTLOOK

The discrepancy in the number of employees partly results from the competences the LAGs have. In the Czech Republic a LAG also is responsible for the controlling of finished projects in contrast to Austria. Moreover a LAG can actively set a course if more human resources are available and that may - to a certain extent - explain why Czech LAGs focused stronger on cultural and social activities (partly realising these projects by themselves) whereas the focus in Austria is strongly on agriculture (also the design and goal of the Austrian LEADER programme is denotative in this context). Additionally Czech LAGs have more competences in deciding about which projects to support because no governmental body participates in that decision.

The number of members of the selection committee does not at first sight seem to have some impact but if we consider that the decision committee is much smaller in the Czech Republic than in Austria and that on average more communities participate in one LAG and thus also want their concerns to be heard then another explanation seems plausible namely the forming of a new project class (see also Kovách and Kučerová, 2006) with high knowledge and skills. Smaller networks seem to be more efficient and to stronger support the interests of the LAG. Thereby a low number of a committees' members, that are detached from individual and solely communal interests should get aspired. Active collaboration needs adequate human resources and can get fostered by smaller networks. A thorough network analysis of LAGs seems promising for further analysis of mechanisms in rural development.

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