

THE PARTICIPATIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF LAG-MEMBERS IN HUNGARY

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ABSTRACT

One of the much debated questions in the governance literature is the social participation of local people. According to the majority of experts, the participation of local actors in decision-making process is growing through the partnerships and thus wiser and fairer decisions can be made in development issues affecting them. Therefore, partnerships have become popular instruments of government to deliver policy goals more effectively. This study focuses on the participative characteristics of members of rural development partnerships.

The participative features of local actors are studied in the paper through the example of the LEADER partnerships. Interviews and two countrywide surveys were conducted in the circle of leaders of Management Offices and members of Local Action Groups (LAGs). The so gained data were analysed by different statistical methods. The results concerning the participation and activity of members proved my hypothesis, according to which the work in partnership does not always end in real and meaningful participation of local actors. Most of the partners typically did not exploit all the possibilities of participating in partnership actions.

Keywords: social participation, activity, rural development partnership, Local Action Group (LAG), LEADER programme

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, development thinking has been dominated by 'decentralisation fever' due to the belief that decentralisation and participation makes for better government by bringing government spatially closer to people (SHORTALL, 2004, pp. 109.). To decentralise some responsibilities to address specific local problems and strengthen bottom-up rural development, participation of local actors has been supported in the European Union (WARD - MCNICHOLAS, 1998).

The term 'participation' means different things to different people, for instance it can be a principle, a practice or an end in itself. In this paper the definition of the World Bank Participation Sourcebook is used which think participation as a 'process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them' (WORLD BANK, 1996, pp. xi.).

Participation is a complex, contested and problematic term (HAYWARD, 2004; STOREY, 1999). Policy makers acknowledged that community involvement has 'a range of benefits, in terms of better decision making and enhanced cost effectiveness' (ATKINSON, 1999, pp. 65.). However, several theorists, for instance MCQUAID (2000) does not believe that the increased participation in decision-making process involves better decision-making in itself, since a larger number of partners may create unclear goals and unequal power relations between the partnership members may lead to social exclusion. KRISHNA (2003) agrees this opinion, according to him it is much more important, that the involved participants how actively participate in the course of partnership working. Since all the

efforts to involve more local actors are in vain, if then their participation is just superfluous.

LEADER method is based on bottom-up approach which involves that local people participate in decision-making about the local rural development 'strategy and in the selection of the priorities to be pursued in their local area' (CEC, 2006). Therefore, according to the rhetoric, the active participation of local public, business and civil actors has been promoted in LEADER in order to reinforce the capacities of local community by involving them (MAUREL, 2008). However, the meaning of community involvement is not clear in LEADER literature, since its degree can be very variable (SHORTALL-SHUCKSMITH, 1998).

Until now only a few case studies (BULLER, 2000; KOVÁCH, 2000; SCOTT, 2004; SHORTALL 2008; SHUCKSMITH, 2000; STOREY, 1999; THUESEN, 2010) have examined who are excluded from partnership membership and among these researches even less is engaged in studying who really take part in decision-making process actively and in a meaningful way. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to reveal whether the current Hungarian LEADER Local Action Groups really fulfil the EU directives concerning the active participation of local actors.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The LEADER programme is thought to be a successful rural development initiative of the European Union. It is based on the partnership of representatives of the civil, business and public sphere. The LEADER has introduced a new approach to rural development theory and also to practice in the Member States. Within the framework of the initiative, rural development projects have been realised in more than 2000 European micro-regions in the last twenty years. Due to its effectiveness, the LEADER has been integrated as a methodological axis into the rural development policy of the second pillar of Common Agricultural Policy.

Based on the extended literature review a hypothesis was set up: it was assumed that working in partnership often did not result in real participation of partners and most of the LAG-members typically did not exploit all the possibilities of participating in partnership actions. To decide whether this hypothesis can be confirmed or should be rejected first interviews were made with some leaders of project management offices of LEADER LAGs in order to get to know better their organizational problems. These interviews helped what further examination techniques should be employed (see *Figure 1*). First statistical data were collected and then two countrywide surveys were conducted: one in the circle of leaders of management offices and another one in the circle of members of LAGs regarding their activity and participative characteristics in the autumn of 2011. At that time 94 Local Action Groups operated in Hungary. Originally 72% of the LAGs were surveyed, but in this paper only 55% of the LAGs (51 partnerships) are examined, because only those local partnerships were analysed where at least the representatives of two civil organizations, two enterprises and two local governments answered the questionnaire appreciably.

In the research participative characteristics of partners in the drafting of local development strategy, partnership meetings, different events and tenders were examined. Beside participation frequency of members, the activity of partners in partnership actions were studied, because they also determined the efficient operation of partnership, since if too many members are inactive, then the partnership may become inoperative.

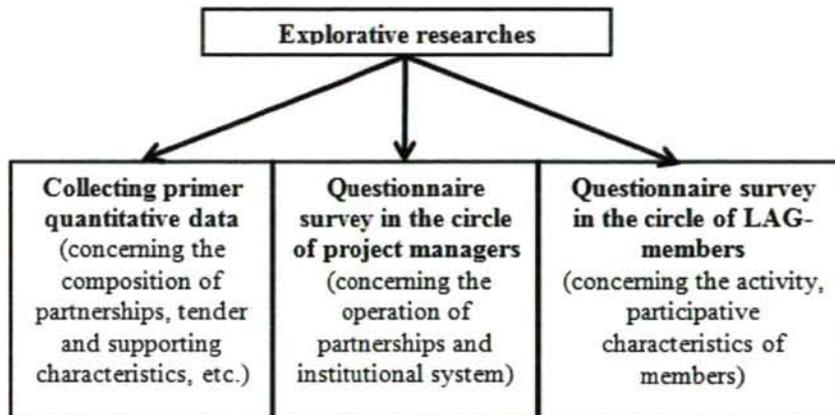


Figure1. The process of data collection

Source: own edition (2013)

The data were analyzed by different statistical methods. First, single variable tests were used to examine the data structure. Then, frequency distribution, different measures of central tendency, dispersion and some other indicators were calculated. While to analyse the relationship among nominal or ordinal variables cross-tabulation was employed, among metric variables correlation-calculation was used.

RESULTS

Prior to the research it was assumed that the participative willingness was higher in the smaller LAGs, because in these partnerships it can be easier to inform the members about the possibilities of participation, find such occasions when the majority of members can be presented at the meetings and support partners in preparing proposals. However, there was no significant relation between the size of partnerships and the participative willingness of members on the basis of correlation analysis.

It is important that more and more partners would contribute with their ideas to the strategy, because if partners do not take part in the drafting of development plans, then its measures and the real development needs of partners may differ significantly. In most of the LAGs, however, the participation willingness in composition of development strategy was quite low. Only every third respondent contributed to the development plan with their ideas or opinions (see *Figure 2*).

Although the majority of LAG-members stated that new tender possibilities played an important role in their accession to the partnership, merely two-fifth of the partners submitted applications in the first two rounds of New Hungary Rural Development Plan (hereinafter called NHRDP) Axis III (see *Figure 2*). The lack of activity in application was explained by three reasons. On the one hand, the lack of time, on the other hand, the changes in financial circumstances of applicants caused their passivity. The third group declared that the local development strategy did not match with the development needs of his region because of the bureaucratic regulations and conventional planning, for this reason he did not write project proposal.

Most of the tender titles were key development target areas for the local governments and they possessed the appropriate human capacity and they own financial resources needed for project proposals. The tenders supported by NHRDP Axis III had relatively large budget, therefore higher amount of own sources were required which could not be ensured by civil organizations with more difficulties than by the local governments. Therefore, the

local governments were much more active in such type of tender submission than the representatives of civil organizations or entrepreneurs.

Hardly more than one-third of the partners submitted proposals in frame of the first round of NHRDP Axis IV (LEADER) (see *Figure 2*). The activity in LEADER proposals had not significant relation to the sphere representation. This feature can be explained by the fact that the budget of proposals in case of Axis IV was smaller. Therefore, smaller own financial sources were required for their implementation, so unlike Axis III, the local people and organizations with less financial sources could submit proposals as well.

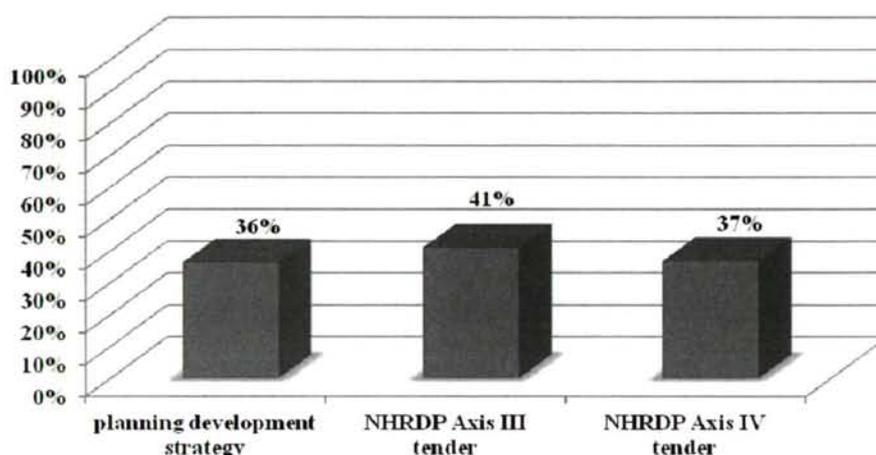


Figure 2. The participation characteristics of LAG-members

Source: own edition (2013)

The participative willingness of partners in meetings and other events was low as well. One-tenth of partners had never attended meetings and one-fifth did it only rarely. The participation at other events – like forums for informing citizens, gatherings and trainings – was even lower than at the meetings.

The survey proved that those members, who had shown larger participative willingness in certain above mentioned activity, took part more intensively in the other fields of partnership actions, too.

Almost one-third of the respondents considered himself explicitly passive participants. Some of them claimed that they were not active because of lack of time, others accounted for apathy. Moreover, several partners felt that only a narrow group's interests were taken into consideration during the decision-making processes. So they considered themselves peripheral members and could not see the point of participating more actively due to their disappointment.

Almost one-tenth of members did not participate in the decision-making of LAGs and the implementation of regional development strategy at all. Most of them did not care the collective interests, had joined the partnership for personal reasons. They just wanted to be well informed regarding on-going events and developments occurring within the regions, but they were not interested in taking part in the collective work.

The representatives of the business sphere were the most passive. The civil sphere took the second place and the local governments were thought to be the most active partners. Slightly more than one-tenth of the respondents from the public sector stated that they were passive observers or they did not participate at all in partnership actions. Almost two-fifth of the partners had the same opinion concerning civil representatives and sixty percent of partners considered the entrepreneurs inactive.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

In most of the LEADER partnerships the participation willingness was low in the course of planning and implementing development strategy, in LAG-meetings and different gatherings, exhibitions, forums and training courses. According to the survey more than one-third of the members were inactive in partnerships. The representatives of the entrepreneurs were the most passive in LAG work out of the three sectors, but the representatives of the other two sectors were not active enough, either. The above results concerning the participation and activity of members prove the hypothesis, according to which the work in partnership does not always end in real and actual involvement of partners.

Manipulative or passive participation were experienced in many LEADER partnerships. While the manipulative participation is simply pretence, in case of passive participation 'people participation by being told what has been decided or has already been happened' (PRETTY, 1995, p.1252.).

The so-called non-participation (see HAYWARD ET AL., 2004) is a typical phenomenon in some of the examined partnerships. In this case the rational decision of members is the reason for the lack of participation. Most of them joined the partnership not in the interest of the community but rather for personal reasons. They often become partners in order to be well-informed concerning the local development and fund-raising possibilities but they do not actually want to participate in the work of the partnership.

In spite of the above mentioned problems, the LEADER programme still has ensured more extended and deeper involvement of local actors than the top-down directed rural development projects but it would be advisable to further deepen and widen the participation. It would be important to define those who totally reject cooperation within the partnership. When the reasons of their passivity are explored, it can be decided whether it is worth working on their activation. In case of those who totally reject cooperation, it is not worth further encouraging their involvement in the partnership. But the participation of those should be facilitated who show at least some minimum willingness to cooperate and have been absent only for the lack of trust or some other personal reasons.

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