

WAY TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT – WAY TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY

Based on the results of a questionnaire survey sent to the LEADER LAGs in 2010 March, this study presents some social aspects of sustainability of rural areas. In this study I deal with some forms of participation as a basis and one of the main characteristic of social sustainability. Cooperation or willingness to cooperate, interest, ability to innovate, confidence, existence of key people, information flow, as well as commitment can be considered as forms of participation and a basis for sustainable society of rural areas. The results of the survey indicates that social participation as a tool for the so called social pillar of sustainability must be a subject for development in order to achieve sustainable development in general.

Keywords: rural areas, sustainable development, sustainable society, participation

INTRODUCTION

The definition of sustainability, and to ensure its views are quite different from scientists, politicians, business, or even in everyday life. We can find many differing opinions about the level of sustainability, the progress, or even about how much should be the rate of change according to the given approach. The most widely cited explanation and the most general approach as well, is that sustainable development - more broadly – is equal to the economic – environmental (ecological) and social development. In the narrow, but quite outdated!- sense sustainable development is focusing on natural resources, promotes the protection, conservation and quality of them. The economic systems are generally tested in the sense that, as a result of the economic activities, the environment is under- or overloaded. The Gothenburg strategy had recognized that in the long term, economic growth, social cohesion and environmental protection must go hand in hand. (EC, 2001). In 2004 the European Commission introduced the review of the Gothenburg strategy and defined new approaches to the new challenges. The review stated that strengthening identification and responsibility as well as *improvement of collaboration* between public and private sector at all levels is an important tool to sustainable development (BULLA ET AL, 2006). In recent years social sustainability has been gaining increased recognition as a fundamental pillar of sustainable development. Previous research on sustainability has been limited to environmental and economic concerns, however, social sustainability has begun to receive political and institutional endorsement, becoming entwined with the sustainable communities agenda and the notions of governance, social capital and corporate social responsibility (COLANTONIO, 2007).

Unfortunately in most cases, the socio-political and environmental debates and arguments are still rarely linked. However sustainability cannot be achieved without the

society: the active involvement and willingness to act are all essential. This is particularly important in rural areas, as significant part of the society live in rural areas, the most of the country's geographical area is rural and also the most of the gross national product is created on these areas. The active participation of stakeholders is indispensable feature of the implementation of sustainable development strategies, because governments alone can not determine and fit together economic, social and environmental objectives (GÁTHY ET AL, 2006). Nevertheless everyone has the right to participate in decisions shaping their lives, and to be recognized and appreciated contribution to the family, the development of community and society (EC, 2001). Development of rural areas can only be successful if people, organizations living and operating there, do cooperate, and coordination of activities takes place as well. It requires the active participation of individuals, enterprises, non governmental and governmental organizations as well.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The survey serving as a basis for this study was conducted in March 2010. The questionnaire including 70 questions was sent to each community with the title LEADER LAGs, assisted by the staff of the Rural Development Division of the Ministry of Rural Development (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development at the time of the research). The rate of response (94%) was highly favourable: 90 out of the 96 questionnaires sent out were returned. Our survey primarily focussed on the establishment of LAGs, their operations, tasks, and the features of the area covered by them.

This study, focusing on sustainability, involves only some part of the questionnaire survey and answers are sought for the followings:

- Level of cooperation/collaboration skills of the local communities.
- Local /regional needs and practices of public participation.
- If the LAG's activities contribute to the cooperation of regional actors.
- The most important aspects of the development of the surveyed areas, regarding economical, ecological and social pillars of sustainability.
- The main obstacles to the development of the surveyed areas, focusing on social factors.

RESULTS

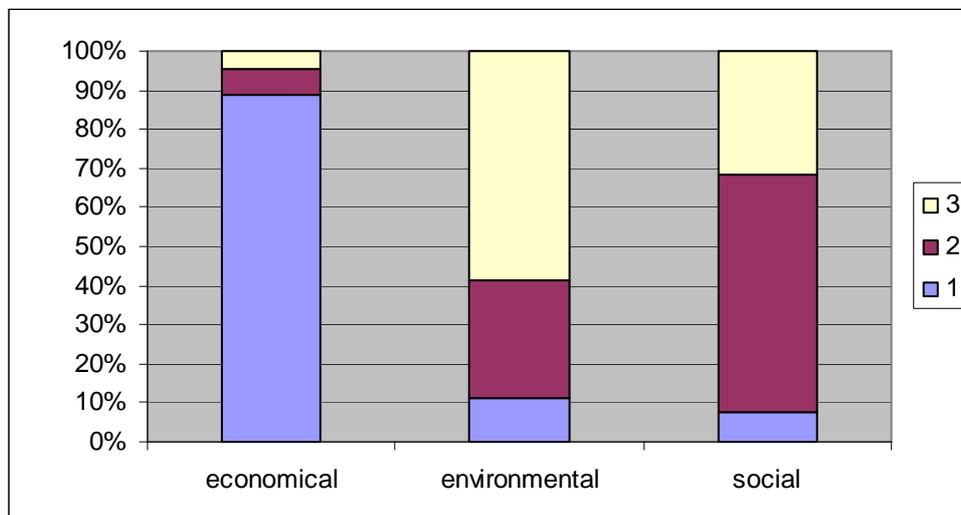
Cooperation and willingness to cooperate play a significant role in the development of rural areas. People's ability to cooperate depends on attitudes and coupled with the generation of social capital. Social capital is generated when people's relationships change in a way to facilitate action. Social capital is a resource for communities and partnerships, as well as an indicator of relations and cooperations established in the society and the economy (KIS 2006). Social capital has also emerged as an important element of social sustainability (COLANTONIO, 2007). Cooperation can be considered as a system of "working" relations between people: individuals as well as organizations with the purpose of realizing mutual benefits and advantages.

According to the result of the survey, - where respondents were asked to mark the level of cooperation on the scale 1-5 (1 weak, 5 strong)-, cooperation or collaboration skills of the local communities is moderate (average 3,41), as well as the needs and practices of public participation (average 3,25).

Playing a key role in the development of rural areas it is expected that LAG’s activities contribute to the cooperation of local or regional actors. According to their answers, 50% of the LAG’s answered that partially, and 50% of them think that totally promote and contribute to the cooperation of local actors, as a result of their coordinating activities. For instance in case of the Hódmezővásárhely micro- region, the LAG organizes trainings, consultation days or conferences and forums in different topics (eg. development of tourism, cooperation of NGO’s).

We also asked the LAG’s to define the most important aspects of the development of the area and got the following results: as the diagram (Figure 1.) demonstrates, the most important aspect is the economical development but social aspect is the second most important for 50% of the respondents. Regarding social development the following topics – as subject of the improvement were mentioned: employment, health, education, culture etc. There were 4 action groups who could not differentiate and considered all the three factors (economical, environmental and social) equally important.

Figure 1. Importance of the three pillars of sustainability considering rural development among respondents



Source: own data collected

In order to identify the factors mostly hindering the development of the surveyed areas the LAGs were asked to rank the factors relevant for their region in order of importance, choosing from 16 defined options (with 1 indicating the most important factor to hinder the development of a given region). Table 1. shows the results of the survey.

Table 1. Order of importance of the social factors hindering the development of areas covered by LAGs

Hindering factors	Average score
<i>Lack of willingness to cooperate</i>	3.4
Lack of knowledge	3.6
<i>Lack of interest</i>	4.2
Lack of the ability to innovate	4.3
Lack of confidence	4.7
Lack of key people	4.7
Lack of information	5.0
Lack of commitment	6.4

Source: Kis-Szekeresné Köteles, 2011

Cooperation can be defined as a working relation between people. The essence of cooperation lies in that it can lead to mutual advantages and benefits for both individuals and the society (Kis, 2008). Cooperation and confidence constitute a closely related system as cooperation is based on confidence. Accordingly, the main obstacle to the establishment and development of cooperations is the lack of confidence. Obviously it is traced back to various reasons as disappointment, lack of knowledge or information.

The success of the adaptation of rural areas highly depends on the preparedness of stakeholders. In this respect knowledge and information must be highlighted. Information influences the decisions and actions of people and organizations, thereby influences the functioning of the economy and society, and consequently sustainable development. Therefore, information – its presence or absence is a considerable differentiating factor, at the level of both local players and different areas as well. Thus, information flow and communication play a really important part in improving the level of preparedness on individuals and their communities. Accordingly, knowledge, skills and abilities have a greater impact on the development than earlier.

People’s lack of interest as well as lack of attitudes in bottom-up rural development as a so called community issue can be traced back to several reasons, including disappointment, lack of confidence, and lack of knowledge and information. A lack of interest in public affairs affects civic activity and social inclusion, which is not favourable to the establishment and development of cooperations, specially significant for this topic. This sets back social competitiveness and social sustainability is questioned in the shorter or longer term. Acceptance of community values and interests and identification with them plays an important role, requiring dialogue, communication, proper information flow, increasing knowledge, acceptance of others, confidence, mutuality, and willingness to act, in order to be able to improve and develop the ability of the community to take initiatives, take action, and assert interests. It serves as a basis for enabling people and their communities to define their future and take action to make it come true.

Social and economic changes require the society to adapt on an on-going basis, which is only ensured by invention and renewal. And the basis for renewal is innovation, that is, the ability and sensitivity to innovate. Innovation can concern products and activities, but not only in the economy but in the social and political sector as well. There is no sustainable development without innovation. Innovation on the other hand - if not

distorted, or wants to be self-destructive - must be complied with the requirements of sustainability. (LIPPÉNYI 2005)

Existence of key people in the society is desirable in order to play a leading role: key people can mobilize and encourage the society for action. They might organize the activities of local people or the communities, resulting increased ability to act. The existence of key people or having leading force is essential in order to coordinate and facilitate common work and participation in rural areas.

The above mentioned factors are closely related and linked, the presence or absence of them can influence the rate and level of participation, consequently the social sustainability.

CONCLUSIONS

The questionnaire survey results concluded that according to the opinion of the Local Action Groups, established to contribute to the implementation of rural development, primarily the economic aspects are the most developed area, but the second most important factor will to be developed is the social aspect, among the three pillars of sustainability.

In rural areas the need and willingness for cooperation is mediocre, which is unfavourable in order to achieve sustainability.

The development of rural areas is significantly hindered by the deficiencies of the rural people and their communities. Cooperation, confidence, interest, the existence of key people, knowledge and information, innovation, as forms of participation, all should be a basis of social sustainability and play an important role in achieving sustainable development.

Consequently, in the realization of sustainable rural development primarily the development of human resources, with special attention to attitudes and willingness should be improved.

There is a need for ‘real’ and ‘working’ communities in order to be able to talk about community initiatives and later effective cooperation. The role of Local Action Groups and other governmental or non- governmental organizations is essential in order to promote and coordinate better participation, cooperation and alliance of local stakeholders.

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