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PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL RURAL DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIPS

UDZIAŁ W LOKALNYCH PARTNERSTWACH NA RZECZ ROZWOJU OBSZARÓW WIEJSKICH

Key words: social participation, partnership, local rural development, LEADER programme, Hungary

Słowa kluczowe: uczestnictwo w życiu społecznym, partnerstwo, lokalny rozwój obszarów wiejskich, program LEADER, Węgry

Abstract. This paper focuses on local partnerships which play an important role in the local implementation of the rural development policy of the European Union. The objective of this study is to reveal whether the Hungarian local partnerships really fulfil the directives of the European Union concerning the active participation. The participative characteristics of members of local partnerships are studied through the example of the current Hungarian LEADER programme. To examine this issue two survey were conducted in the circle of leaders of management offices and members of Local Action Groups. The so gained data were analysed by different statistical methods. The results concerning the participation and activity of members proved our hypothesis, according to which the work in partnership does not always end in real and meaningful participation of local actors.

Introduction

Partnership, as means of increasing participation in decision-making, has become a very popular instrument of government to deliver integrated rural development policy goals more effectively [Derkzen, Bock 2009, Edwards et al. 2001, Little 2001, Goodwin 1998, Marsden, Murdoch 1998, Regéczi 2005]. Participation has different types in the literature. One of the widespread classifications of participation is related to Pretty [1995] who determined three different kinds of participation. The first one is manipulative participation in which participation is simply pretence. Secondly, passive participation can be mentioned, where 'people participate by being told what has been decided or has already happened'. Finally, the third type is self-mobilisation in which 'people participate by taking initiatives independently of external institutions to change systems' (1252.p.).

Policy makers acknowledged that community involvement has 'a range of benefits, in terms of better decision making and enhanced cost effectiveness' [Atkinson 1999]. However, some theorists, for instance McQuaid [2000] do not believe that increased participation in decision-making process involves better decision-making, since a larger number of partners may create unclear goals and unequal power relations between partnership members may lead to social exclusion. As Krishna [2003] notes 'there is no implication that more participation is always better than less' (367.p.). In our opinion it is much more important 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.

In the literature a new approach of participatory practice has gained ground recently, namely the concept of non-participation and peripheral participation as an own rational choice of community members. For instance, Hayward et al. [2004] acknowledged that non-participation can indicate social exclusion, but they also stress that non-participation is not necessarily evidence of social exclusion. Participation is not always positive experience and does not always result in empowerment. On the other hand 'the choice not to participate can actually be viewed as an act of empowerment' (96.p.). Therefore, measuring levels of participation can lead to wrong assessing of social inclusion, because it does not take into consideration community member who chose non-participation. Therefore, scholars must act very circumspectly in the course of participation researches. Moreover, Shortall [2008] noted that participation does not mean equal participation, since she found 'the voices and views of some groups are given greater weight than the voices of others' (452.p.).

Materials and methods

The participative features of partners are studied through the current Hungarian LEADER initiative. This programme is based on the partnership of local governments, entrepreneurs and civil societies, and it has introduced a completely new approach to rural development philosophy, methodology and 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. In the current programming period (2007-2013) 96 Local Action Groups were acknowledged in Hungary, which cover 96 percent of settlements and 45 percent of population [Németh, 2009]. So LEADER partnerships covers the whole country except of Budapest and the larger towns and cities.

Prior to the research we assumed that working in partnership often does not result in real participation of partners. Most of the partners typically would not exploit all the possibilities of participating in partnership actions. To decide whether this hypothesis should be confirmed or rejected it is necessary to examine the participative characteristics of partners in the drafting of local development strategy, partnership meetings, different events and tenders. Beside participation frequency of members, the activity of partners in partnership actions also determines the efficient operation of partnership. If too many members are inactive, then the partnership may become inoperative.

In the frame of a preliminary research in the beginning of 2011, interviews were made with leaders of project management offices of LEADER Local Action Groups (hereinafter called LAG) in Central Hungary and the Southern Transdanubia regions in order to learn the features of rural development partnerships and organisational problems. These explorative research projects helped to decide what means and techniques should be employed in the course of further examinations of LEADER partnerships.

In the course of the further research questionnaires were completed in the circle of leaders of management offices and another one in circle of members of LAGs concerning their activity and participative characteristics between August and November 2011. Only those partnerships were analysed in this article where at least two local governments, two civil organizations and two entrepreneurs and the leader of management office answered the questionnaire appreciably. Fifty-one partnerships met these demands as it can be seen on figure 1.

The data processing was made by using statistical methods, applying SPSS and Microsoft Excel programmes. To examine first the data structure single variable tests were employed. Beside frequency distribution, different measures of central tendency, dispersion and some other indicators were calculated depending on which level the variables were measured. Cross-tabulation was used for the examination of relations among nominal and ordinal variables listed in the survey of members of LAGs. The relations among metric variables of the fact sheet completed by leaders of management organizations and the relations among indexes produced from variables of the questionnaires of LAG-members were analysed by correlation-calculations.

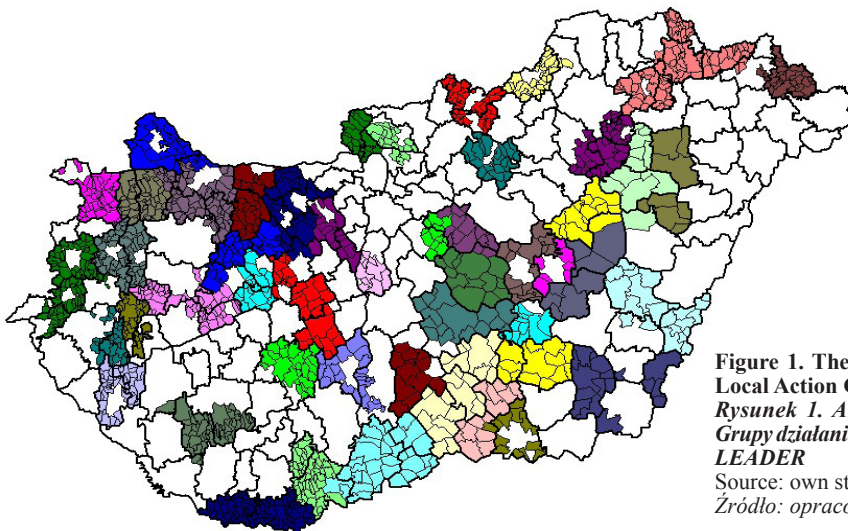


Figure 1. The analysed LEADER Local Action Groups
Rysunek 1. Analizowane Lokalne Grupy działania w ramach programu LEADER

Source: own study
Źródło: opracowanie własne

Results

Participation in the LEADER partnerships

If partners do not participate in the drafting of development plans, then its measures and the real development needs of partners may differ significantly. Therefore, it is important that more and more partners would contribute with their ideas to the strategy. In most of the Action Groups, however, the participation willingness in composition of development strategy was quite low according to the survey (Fig. 2). Only a little bit more than one third of the respondents contributed to the development plan with their ideas or opinions.

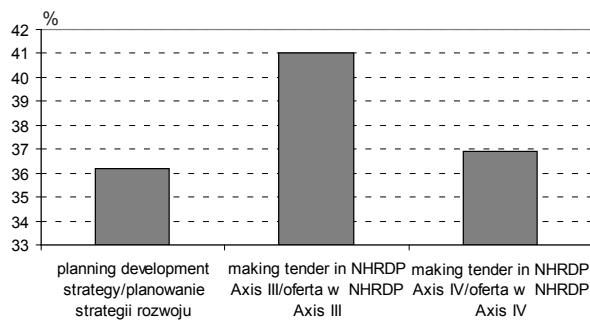


Figure 2. The participative portion of LAG-members in planning and implementing of local rural development strategy
Rysunek 2. Udział członków LGD w zakresie planowania i wdrażania lokalnych strategii rozwoju obszarów wiejskich

Source: own study

Źródło: opracowanie własne

representatives of the public sphere (56%) wrote application in the first two rounds of NHRDP Axis III, less than one-third of the civil and business sphere representatives did so. Probably it had an essential part in this tendency that most of the tender titles were key development target areas for most of local governments. Moreover, the local governments possessed the appropriate human capacity and the 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 or with more difficulties than by the local governments.

Thirty-seven percent of the respondents submitted proposals in frame of the first round of NHRDP Axis IV (LEADER Axis) (Fig. 2). The activity in LEADER proposals had significant relation to neither the school qualification, nor 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 actors with less financial sources could submit proposals as well.

The survey has revealed that the participative willingness of members 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. While one-third of the respondents attended rarely, five percent have never been to any event yet. The latter ratio is better than the participation rate at the meetings.

Prior to the research it was assumed that the participative willingness was higher in the smaller Action Groups, because in these LAGs it was 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 Action Group and the participative willingness of members on the basis of correlation analysis. Nevertheless it was proved in the course of research 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.

Activity in the LEADER partnerships

Beside the participative willingness of LAG-members, we regarded it important to study their activity characteristics, because - according to the data of special literature - the participation of those members in partnership actions, who are only passive observers and do not work for the successful operation of partnership, is pointless. The participation of inactive members is in fact dispensable, since they contribute only with their membership fee to the operation of Action Group, but the findings show that even these members often have overdue payment.

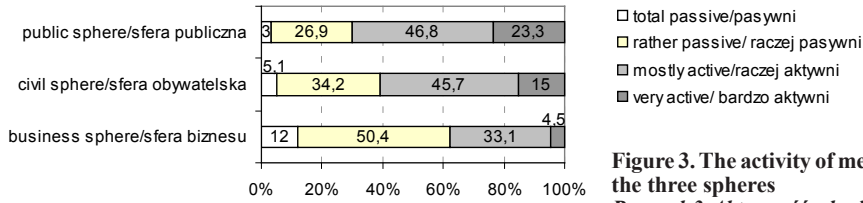


Figure 3. The activity of members representing the three spheres

Rysunek 3. Aktywność członków reprezentujących trzy grupy interesariuszy

Source: own study

Źródło: opracowanie własne

Almost two-third of the respondents considered himself active participants. On the other hand, twenty-eight percent stated that they took part rather in passive way. Some of them said that they were passive because of lack of time, others accounted for apathy. According to the third group of respondents the partnership do not operate appropriately because only a narrow group's interests were taken into consideration during the decision-making processes. So they consider themselves peripheral members and cannot see the point of participating more actively due to their disappointment.

Almost one-tenth of those who completed the questionnaire did not take part in the decision-making of Action Groups and the implementation of regional development strategy at all. Most of these members stated that they did not care the collective interests, but they joined the partnership for personal reasons. They became partners mainly in order to be well informed regarding on-going events and developments occurring within the regions, but they did not want to participate in the collective work.

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 (Fig. 3). Almost forty percent of respondents had the same opinion regarding representatives of civil organisations and sixty percent of partners considered the representatives of the business sector inactive.

So the respondents think the local governments were the most active, the civil sphere was on the second place and the entrepreneurs seemed to be the least active participants.

Conclusions

In case of most of the LEADER partnerships the participation willingness was low both in the course of planning and implementing development strategy. More than one-third of the respondents do not or rarely take part at LAG meetings and different gatherings, exhibitions, forums and training courses. The features of participation were examined from the aspects of quantity as well as quality. It was found that more than one-third of the respondents are inactive in partnerships. According to the majority of partners, the representatives of the entrepreneurs are the most passive in LAG work out of the three sectors, but the representatives of the other two sectors are not active enough, either. The above results concerning the participation and activity of members prove our hypothesis, according to which the work in partnership does not always end in real and actual participation of partners.

We have experienced manipulative or passive participation in many partnerships, as it is mentioned in the preface. The so-called non-participation by Hayward is also a typical phenomenon in some of the examined partnerships. In this case the rational decision of members is 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.

The activity of members is significantly affected by the personality of local leaders and their ability to stimulate their partners. Therefore, in our opinion, the management competencies should be improved through training courses.

In spite of the above mentioned problems, the LEADER program still ensures 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. We consider it 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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Streszczenie

W artykule podjęto zagadnienia lokalnego partnerstwa, które odgrywa ważną rolę we wdrażaniu polityki rozwoju obszarów wiejskich Unii Europejskiej. Celem badań było wskazanie, czy węgierskie lokalne partnerstwa spełniły wytyczne dyrektywy Unii Europejskiej dotyczącej aktywnego uczestnictwa w rozwoju lokalnym. Badanie przeprowadzono na próbie pochodzącej z węgierskiego programu LEADER, wśród liderów instytucji zarządzających i członków lokalnych grup działania. Wyniki analiz dotyczące udziału i aktywności członków potwierdziły hipotezę, iż praca w ramach partnerstwa nie zawsze kończy się realnym i znaczącym udziałem lokalnych podmiotów.

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