

COMPLIANCE OF LOCAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES WITH THE LEADER PROGRAMME: THE CASE OF THE KELME REGION LOCAL ACTION GROUP

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Abstract

A Local Action Group (LAG) is an association aiming to implement the LEADER rural development policy programme, to create and develop partnerships and to make a significant contribution to the management of rural development. LAGs draw up local development strategies for the territory they represent, which are implemented by rural community and business organisations and local authorities in cooperation with the social partners. LAGs bring together the economic and social partners operating in an area, involve the local population in decision-making processes and provide advice. The paper aims to answer the question: how is the essence of LEADER programme fulfilled - creating links between the rural economy and development actions. The research problem is investigated using the methods of scientific literature analysis, analysis of strategic and political documents, systematisation, case studies and other methods. The study found that the strategies were developed taking into account the existing characteristics of the area and the expectations of the population, and involved the involvement of key stakeholders: municipal and district staff, representatives of business and rural communities, and invited consultants. The strategies have been developed in line with LEADER principles, the local development strategies have an integrated approach. It integrates the activities of different sectors, the whole project or specific groups, and strengthens the links between key economic, social, cultural and environmental actors and sectors.

Keywords: rural community, strategy, local action group, rural development, project activities, LEADER programme.

JEL Codes: O22, O35, P25.

Introduction

Since 2000, the first rural community organisations have started to emerge in Lithuania. In 2004, Lithuania's accession to the European Union brought EU Structural Funds support for rural development. One of the programme's instruments to help achieve economic, social and territorial cohesion and reduce the rural-urban divide is the LEADER programme and, since 2014, the community-driven local development programme. LEADER is the French acronym for "links between rural development actions" (Kaimo plėtros LEADER..., 2010). Local Action Groups (LAGs) have been set up in EU countries and Lithuania to implement the programme.

The LEADER programme offers a wide range of opportunities for LAGs to improve the quality of life in rural areas and to address environmental, economic and social problems by involving local people, rural NGOs and local entrepreneurs (Shishkova, 2020). The success of LEADER is due to the fact that it is not a traditional *top-down* approach, but a new *bottom-up* approach that enables rural people to address their own environmental, social, economic and cultural problems (Lietuvos LEADER..., 2023). The main factors that influence the performance of LAGs in local development strategies in southern Bulgaria are: 1) multi-foundationality; 2) the organisation's experience and expertise in rural development; 3) communication with institutions (Shishkova,

2020). The EU is actively promoting the concept of 'smart villages', which has been transformed into a rural development instrument. Increased use of new technologies and in particular the internet (Komorowski, Stanny, 2020), the creation of synergies between initiatives and stakeholders, and leadership are seen as key steps in the fight against rural decline.

The activities of LAGs in the context of the LEADER programme were more frequently studied in the first decade of LAG activity in Lithuania (Atkočiūnienė, Aleksandravičius, 2005; Sakalauskienė, 2006; Tamošiūnas, Liubomirskienė, 2010). Dar 2010 m. rengiant Žaliąją knygą (2010), a series of discussions were organised to take the first step in the strategic planning process and to clarify the public's expectations regarding the direction of Lithuania's rural policy. The role of LAGs was examined, how EU and national funds are invested, how local communities are activated through consultation, how local development strategies are prepared. The studies paid little attention to the priority areas for the development of the LAG territory and the themes of the strategies.

The theoretical regularities of strategic planning of rural development have been analysed by Lithuanian and foreign authors. Mintzberg (1991) and Lorange (2005) have analysed the concept of strategy, general aspects of strategic management, and addressed regional development issues that can be applied to the preparation of local development strategies. Jasaitis, Šurkuvienė (2006) addressed the issues of the integrity of the study of rural development change, identifying the functions of rural areas, which are interlinked and fulfilled by the various actors in rural development in the context of a range of development actions. Tamošiūnas, Šiaulianskienė (2010, p. 234) revealed that "rural development strategies are prepared using only the general methodologies for preparing strategies, with the LEADER principles complementing this process". However, Komorowski and Stanny (2020) point out in their research findings that it is essential to protect the LEADER programme from bureaucratisation. Melnikienė, Vidickienė (2019) holistically assessed the

objectives, measures and achievements of the Lithuanian agricultural policy and identified 6 types of strategies or opportunities for the use of the components of the qualitative structure of the producer, which are oriented to spatial and temporal characteristics.

In this paper, the scientific problem is formulated by posing the question: how is the essence of the LEADER programme fulfilled in terms of creating linkages between the rural economy and development actions?

The object of the study is the Local Development Strategy.

The aim of the study is to analyse local development strategies and to determine how they fit into the LEADER programme.

Research methodology. The methods used to investigate the research problem include analysis of scientific literature, analysis of strategic and political documents, systematisation, case study, synthesis and other methods. The theoretical part of the research examines the aspects of strategic management of rural development. The empirical research followed the concept of realist evaluation presented by Pawson, Tilley (1997), which is based on the theory of social systems change. LEADER is classified as a special case of social change, where social conditions are transformed on the basis of new ideas for the development of an area. According to Pawson and Tilley (1997), the preferred interpretation is one that seeks to identify: the mechanisms of programme design that can be influenced and that determine the outcomes of the programme; the conditions under which these mechanisms operate; and the groups of individuals that these mechanisms serve. In Lithuania, this concept was substantiated by Moskvina (2008), who sought to evaluate active labour market policy instruments and analysed evaluation issues.

In order to identify the priority areas of the 3 strategies for the period 2004 - 2023 in the territory of the Kelme Region Partnership LAG, an analysis of the LEADER principles, the composition of the LAG Board and the preparation of the strategies was carried out. Three local development strategies prepared by the Kelme Region Partnership LAG were analysed: 1) Kelme Region Partnership LAG

Pilot Strategy 2004-2006 (hereinafter - Strategy I); 2) Kelme Region Partnership Local Development Strategy 2008-2014 under the Lithuanian Rural Development 2007-2013 programming axis “Implementation of the Leader Approach” (hereinafter - Strategy II); 3) Kelme Region Partnership LAG Local Development Strategy 2016-2023 (hereinafter - Strategy III) (Kelmės krašto partnerystė..., 2022).

Theoretical aspects of strategic management of rural development

The way in which a LAG is set up can be seen as a kind of organisational management structure for the LEADER programme (Atkočiūnienė, 2012), as a kind of regulation of local initiatives through the application of norms set by higher territorial institutions (Juška, Poviliūnas, 2010). In the scientific literature, strategy is defined as the overarching programme of action of an organisation, indicating the priorities of long-term objectives and the resources to achieve them. Strategy is an overall plan of action that provides for the overall development goals of an organisation. The implementation of LAG strategies in Lithuania under the LEADER programme contributes to the achievement of regional development policy objectives and is based on the implementation of EU horizontal principles (Kaimo plėtros LEADER..., 2010).

A local development strategy should help to build on the strengths of an area and create the preconditions for the ongoing regeneration of a rural area (Shishkova, 2020). By following the principles of partnership, a local development strategy helps to make decisions on public investment, and by following the principles of bottom-up and innovative approaches, to create the economic, social, environmental, institutional, political balance and well-being of a rural area (Komorowski, Stanny, 2020). A local development strategy should enable to respond to the most important needs of the rural population, to establish cooperative links between local development actors and beneficiaries, and to ensure a sense of responsibility in the use of local resources

(Atkočiūnienė, 2012). Komorowski and Stanny (2020) believe that it is necessary to draw on experience, existing and new forms of cooperation, long-term and successful examples, often related to rural regeneration or the LEADER programme when developing a Smart Villages strategy. The LEADER programme should not be allowed to become bureaucratic or focused on municipal functions.

Research papers (Kairytė, Vidickienė, Kuliešius, 2008; Ribašauskienė and Naujokienė, 2009; Tamošiūnas and Liubomirskienė, 2009) deal with the cases of Lithuanian LAGs, the peculiarities of the LAG management, and the process of implementation of local development strategies. Various documents (Kaimo plėtros LEADER..., 2010) provide methodologies for self-assessment of local action groups, opportunities for adding value to the LEADER programme. There is no qualitative assessment of the content of local development strategies in Lithuania, no objective methodology for assessing the impact of the strategy as a document and of the interventions. According to Moskvina (2008, p. 7), “the need to account for the resources used makes it necessary to look for ways of evaluating the results of the programmes and strategies implemented”. According to the researcher, the tool for examining social programmes (such as LEADER) is considered to be realistic evaluation. Evaluation is carried out to help political decision-makers anticipate and implement certain social changes through projects and programmes.

According to Melnikienė, Vidickienė (2019), the successful implementation of the strategies would benefit from research on the application of qualitative structure analysis in the analysis of strategies to promote farmers as service providers. Pawson, Tilley (1997) and Moskvina (2008) argue that, against the backdrop of ever-changing social conditions, evaluation remains a critical function of any social action. Evaluation also plays a key role in the decision-making process and in the improvement of any activity, and ensures the

accountability of the initiators of measures to the wider society. Melnikienė, Vidickienė (2019) point out that the development of the innovation strategy, which is most in line with the nature of the local development strategy, requires the application of more and newer measures related to ways of promoting post-industrial agriculture and rural development. According to Vidickienė (2018), the change strategy needs to be more focused on supplying the local market with organic and/or fresh food products, on service areas, and on a servitised business model that integrates many activities.

Komorowski, Stanny (2020) suggest that there is a certain analogy between the smart village concept and the concept of sustainable development. However, the authors of this paper believe that there is also an analogy between the LEADER programme, the smart rural concept and the concept of sustainable development. The concepts focus on balancing the economy, society and the natural environment, building synergies and strong stakeholder partnerships. Shishkova (2020), in her research in southern Bulgaria, found that in order to achieve sustainable results in a LAG area, it is important to ensure the sequencing of actions over a longer period of time (over several programming periods) as well as to increase the number of cooperation initiatives between the three sectors, which help to expand and strengthen the accumulated development capacities of the area at local level. The researcher also recommends maintaining regular contact with representatives of the government bodies managing the programme, as this will increase the level of social capital.

Establishing Local Action Groups in Lithuania. Between 2001 and 2003, 3 LAGs were registered in Lithuania. In 2006, 35 LAGs were registered. By 2008, there were 47 LAGs operating in the country, covering practically all rural areas of Lithuania. Five LAGs covered more than one municipality, but from 2007 onwards, a trend started to emerge that LAGs were splitting up and

merging only at the municipal level. 51 LAGs were active in Lithuania in 2009 (Gumbrevičienė, 2008), but in the period from 2017 to 2023, four LAGs merged, leaving only 49 (Lietuvos LEADER..., 2023). The European Commission encourages, and good practice shows, that LAGs should cover more than 1 territorial administrative unit.

The Lithuanian LAGs, which started to emerge in 2003, have already implemented thematic pilot Integrated Local Development Strategies in the period 2004-2006. In 2006-2007, LAGs prepared local development strategies for 2007-2013, in 2013-2014 they prepared strategies for 2014-2023 and in 2022-2023 they prepared strategies for 2024-2029, which could be thematic as well. Some LAGs have prepared and implemented four Local Development Strategies in the period 2001-2024 and plan to prepare a Smart Rural Strategic Plan in 2024. The preparation and implementation of Local Development Strategies is a complex and long-term process aimed at improving living conditions, fostering citizenship and entrepreneurship, involvement and participation in the management of rural change, strengthening partnerships and economic development, infrastructure, environmental and social justice in a given geographical or community development area. The process should create linkages between the rural economy and development actions, and should include advisory and consultative activities, and a series of steps and actions to be taken in order to achieve the objectives of the strategy.

Kelme Region Partnership LAG activities and analysis of local development strategies. The Kelme Region Partnership LAG was established in July 2004. The number of LAG board members has been growing, all three sectors are represented (Table 1), it brings together all the rural NGOs, business and municipality delegates, the principle of equal opportunities between men and women has been maintained, and young people have been involved.

Table 1. Composition of the Kelme Region Partnership LAG Board members by represented sector, gender and age, 2006 – 2023

I strategy	II strategy	III strategy
NGO sector - 3/1 male/female	NGO sector - 1/5 male/female	NGO sector - 1/4 male/female
Business sector - 1/1 male/female	Business sector - 2/1 male/female	Business sector - 4/1 male/female
Government sector - 1/1 male/female	Government sector - 2/1 male/female	Government sector - 1/1 male/female
Total: 4/4 male/female (8 members)	Total: 5/7 male/female (12 members)	Total: male/female - 6/6 (12 members)
Total: male/female proc. 50/50	Total: male/female proc. 40/60	Total: male/female proc. 41,7/58,3
Of these, 2 are young persons under 25, male/female 1/1	Of these, 1 is a young man under 29	Of these, 2 are young persons under 29, male/female 1/1

The Kelme Region Partnership LAG unites an area that is administratively and territorially homogeneous, covering most of the territory of Kelme district. The entire territory of the Kelme Region Partnership LAG is 1690 sq. km or 90 % of the territory of the district municipality. The territory of the LAG covers 10 of the 11 wards in Kelme District. The LAG area meets the requirement of a population of between 5 000 and 150 000 inhabitants, including small towns and cities of up to 6 000 inhabitants. The LAG represents the rural areas of the district. It covers a population of more than 26 000 inhabitants; 82 homesteads, 667 villages, 6 towns and 2 cities with a population of less than 6 000.

Strategy I. The Kelme Region Partnership LAG's pilot Integrated Rural Development Strategy 2006-2008 is an example of new public management practice. It has been prepared in accordance with innovative methods of strategy development - following LEADER principles, researching the needs of the population, based on cooperation between partners, and actively involving the local population in the strategy development process. 80 active local people were involved in the direct preparation of the strategy and over 2000 rural people participated in joint events linked to the preparation of the strategy. The first strategy is more like a strategic plan than a strategy, with a strategic timeframe of only 3 years and weak links between the content elements of the strategy. However, this strategy is characterised by continuity, as many of its measures were planned to be extended into the next programming period. It is a document with long-term priorities and a

thematic focus on enhancing the value of local products. Funding of 51 262, 70 EUR has been foreseen for the implementation of the pilot strategy. The aim of the strategy is to develop the capacities of community representatives and their leaders, to initiate changes in rural development in order to increase added value and improve the quality of life; to acquire new knowledge and experience in the implementation of rural development measures, combining in a comprehensive way natural, cultural heritage and human resources. The pilot strategy for 2006-2008 was positively evaluated by foreign experts and ranked fourth among the strategies prepared by Lithuanian Local Action Groups in terms of the number of points scored. The LAG attached great importance to this strategy and it helped to prepare a later, more developed strategy. Changes have influenced the refinement and adjustment of the strategy.

Strategy II. The Kelme Region Partnership LAG Strategy (2008 - 2014) is a high quality result of collective work and is in line with other national rural development policy documents. It is an example of a new public management practice, developed on the basis of innovative methods of strategy development - adherence to LEADER principles, population needs survey, cooperation between partners, active involvement of local population in the strategy development process. 100 active villagers were involved in the direct preparation of the strategy and over 4000 villagers participated in joint events linked to the preparation of the strategy. For the implementation of the Strategy, an amount of 2 548 656, 00 EUR is

foreseen. Key areas for the implementation of the Strategy have been identified, in line with the Lithuanian Rural Development Programme 2007-2013. The Strategy takes into account the national development trends in Lithuania and the requirements of the European Union policy. The aim of the Strategy is to support the creation and development of small business initiatives, creating new jobs and activities and additional sources of income, and to create an attractive, modern environment to live and work in the LAG territory. The strategy has been developed in line with the previously used and proven "bottom-up" approach, maintaining consistency with the European Community's horizontal areas: equal opportunities, sustainable development, information society, regional development.

Strategy III. The Local Development Strategy of the Kelme Region Partnership LAG for 2016-2023 is in line with the main objectives, tasks and descriptions of measures under the axis of the Lithuanian Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 "Creating an Attractive Environment for Rural Life". The Strategy takes into account the

horizontal areas of the European Community: sustainable development, equal opportunities, regional development, information society. The direct preparation of the Strategy involved 304 active participants and over 570 rural residents of all ages participated in joint events linked to the preparation of the Strategy. The strategy is based on the needs of the population, which were identified through interviews. The aim of the strategy is to promote and implement the idea of partnership in the Kelme district by attracting national and European Union financial support for integrated rural development and promoting competitiveness growth, while creating conditions for the improvement of the quality of life of rural residents. The strategy also aims to strengthen the economy of the area, reduce social exclusion and promote entrepreneurship. More than 2.17 million EUR is foreseen for the implementation of the strategy.

All three LAG strategies have been developed taking into account local specificities, in line with LEADER principles (Table 2), complemented in Strategy III by the principles of Networking and Co-operation and Innovation.

Table 2. LEADER principles underpinning the Local Development Strategies of the Kelme Region Partnership Local Operational Group for the period 2005 - 2023

LEADER principles		
I strategy 2006 – 2008	II strategy 2008 – 2014	III strategy 2016 – 2023
Territorial	Territorial	Territorial
"Bottom-up"	"Bottom-up"	"Bottom-up"
Partnerships	Partnerships	Partnerships
-	-	Innovation
Integrated approach	Integrated approach	Integrated approach
-	-	Networking and cooperation
Financing	-	Local financing and governance

The process of developing the strategies has been essentially a voluntary activity of local communities, focused on changes in the area rather than on the development of a single organisation developing the strategy. The content and process of the strategies is based on LEADER and the Lithuanian Rural Development Programmes 2007-2013 and 2014-2020, and is aligned with other national and local government documents and the Baltic Sea Region strategies. The content of the second strategy is complemented by the measures of the first strategy, while the second

strategy is continuous and uninterrupted with the first (pilot) strategy. The visions of the strategies, which are very similar in all periods, are dominated *the growth of local human resources, the rural economy and social well-being, the improvement of the quality of life of the people, the increase of entrepreneurship of the rural population, the revitalisation of cultural life and the preservation of the environment.* Strategies are in line with the European Community's horizontal areas: *sustainable development, equal opportunities, regional development, information society.*

The pilot integrated strategy and the 2008-2014 strategies each identified four priorities. In the Pilot Integrated Strategy 2006-2008, the Kelme District Rural Study and Integrated Development Strategy aimed to increase the value of local production through the joint efforts of the rural population by facilitating the entry of small-scale production units into the markets, and envisaged activities according to the following four priorities: 1) developing entrepreneurship of the rural population; 2) diversification of rural businesses; 3) supporting and cooperating small-scale farmers; and 4) conserving and exploiting the natural and cultural heritage for the purpose of developing business. The

priorities of the 2008-2014 strategy were: 1) diversification of rural businesses and strengthening of economic potential; 2) renovation and adaptation of public buildings and cultural heritage sites for the development of handicrafts and the development of community spirit; 3) adaptation of public infrastructure to the needs of the rural population; and 4) promotion of the activity of social organisations and the increase of opportunities for material expression. The third strategy for 2016-2023 has only two priorities: 1) creating an economically attractive rural environment; 2) creating an attractive rural living environment (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Identified links between the rural economy and development actions in the local development strategies of the Kelme Region Partnership according to the identified priorities

The analysis of the measures and activities of all three local development strategies of the Kelme Region Partnership identified promising areas of LAG activities that fulfil the essence of the LEADER programme - *activation of rural population and promotion of community activities; partnership and leadership development by informing, advising, involving and encouraging participation in the management of rural development; promoting the uniqueness and ethno-cultural heritage of the area; finding and initiating new economic and social activities in rural areas; organising*

cultural activities and employment in rural areas, finding new ways of tackling exclusion; promoting and introducing innovation, encouraging volunteering, especially among young people, and restoring and protecting biodiversity. It is recommended that the principles of the LEADER programme are followed responsibly, which can help to create and strengthen the links between the rural economy and the development actions in the local development strategies of the Kelme Region Partnership (Table 3).

Table 3. LEADER principles that can help to create and strengthen the links between the rural economy and development actions in the local development strategies of the Kelme Region Partnership

LEADER principles - areas for local economic development	Signs of Principles - development actions
Place-based approach	Placemaking based on the unique nature of local development conditions; Creates added value based on local resources; Proactive (stimulating) approach to development;
Networking	Equal, goal-oriented, multilateral cooperation between different types of actors; Non-hierarchical relationships and functioning;
Innovation	Applying new ways of working and advising; Innovative strategies to solve old and new problems; Enhancing territorial competitiveness and building community resilience;
Integration of local economic sectors (multi-sectorality)	Strategic alignment of resources, activities and stakeholder competences; Concentration of forces in key sectors, branches of the economy to create a critical mass of potential for the development of the area; Creating long-term synergies, complementarities and sustainability;
Local partnership	Creation of a new collective identity and a new organisational culture based on the unity of the partners, ensuring coordination and cooperation as specified in the project agreements;
Decentralised financing	A comprehensive grant to allow LAGs to target resources to local needs and specific strategies; Flexible and rapid support for innovative sustainable projects; Subsidiarity and autonomy in financial decision-making;
Bottom-up approach	Active involvement of all local actors and sources of creative potential; Empowering new actors to express themselves.

*The strategies have an integrated and multisectoral framework, covering several sectors of activity.

Conclusions

1. The concept, goals and objectives of the EU-Lithuanian rural development process have evolved with changes in the economy, the needs of the population and the external rural environment. The main objectives of rural development management are to improve the quality of life of the population; to improve community relations; to promote economic and social cohesion; to create conditions for job creation and employment in rural areas; to enhance the landscape, natural environment and ethnic culture; to foster community entrepreneurship; and to involve the population in the planning and implementation of change in rural areas.

2. The empirical study of the three strategies in Kelme district has shown that all local development strategies have been prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Strategic Planning Methodology. The analysis of external and internal factors and SWOT of the territory of the Kelme Region Partnership LAG has been carried out, the vision, mission and development priorities of the territory have been

formulated, the strategic objectives and measures for their implementation have been envisaged, and the system of management, implementation and monitoring of the strategy has been provided. A large number of rural community projects have been developed to implement the strategies. All the strategies have been approved and are in line with the strategic provisions of EU, national and district municipality documents. The strategies have received funding from the EU Structural Funds, the government and the municipality.

3. The strategies have been developed taking into account existing local characteristics and the expectations of the population, and have involved the involvement of key stakeholders: municipal and district staff, representatives of business and rural communities, and invited consultants. Rural community leaders have been consulted in the prioritisation process, so that the priorities are in line with the strategic expectations and needs of the population for local initiatives. The strategies focus on cleaning up the rural environment, strengthening the economy, developing new competences of the

population and improving their quality of life and working conditions.

4. All three LAG strategies have been developed in line with LEADER principles. The strategies align projects and activities, forming a sequence of actions, a chain of projects. They integrate the activities of different sectors, of all project activities or of specific groups, and strengthen the links between key economic,

social, cultural and environmental actors and sectors. All this is covered by the priorities and measures set out in the strategy. Local Development Strategies take an integrated approach, contributing to policy objectives at EU level, addressing local economic, social (including cultural) and environmental issues in projects that aim to cover multi-sectoral activities.

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