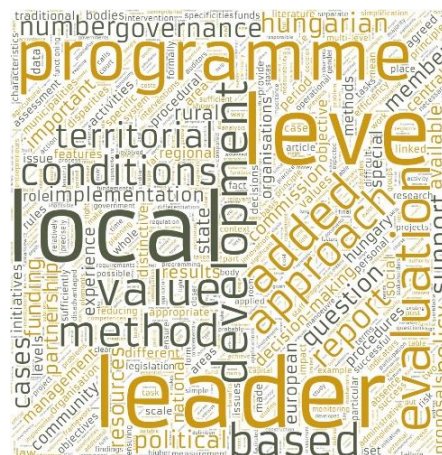


COMMENTS ON THE EUROPEAN COURT OF AUDITORS' SPECIAL REPORT ON THE LEADER PROGRAMME

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Abstract: Concerning the efficiency of the different development methods, especially the definition of added value, neither science nor practice has so far established a universally accepted opinion. A special report of the European Court of Auditors in July 2022 on the "other values" of the LEADER/CLLD development method also pointed out which factors that are closely linked to added value might be missing from an EU evaluation. These factors are the conditions that, in a highly logical correlation, can guarantee the success of a development method. The study, while presenting the most important conditions for the efficiency of the LEADER method, evaluates and responds to the Court of Auditors' Special Report, which does not sufficiently address these issues. In doing so, it contributes to a multi-faceted presentation of the role of the LEADER method in development policy and to the formulation of the reader's own, independent judgement.

Keywords: LEADER method, CLLD, rural development, added value

1. Introduction

The LEADER approach to development, which today looks back to more than three decades, is a stimulating research topic which, according to the literature, will generate a number of research programmes, both at national and transnational level, with the aim of verifying the effectiveness of this approach and exploring its characteristics and added value from different perspectives, as well as bottlenecks, contradictions and missed opportunities (Servillo 2019). The relevance of the development method is underlined by the finding that the failure of the traditional regional development approach to a capitated approach is evident, while the importance of investing in local resources and social and territorial capital has previously been given little prominence within EU and national development policies (Barca 2009). A strategic and fundamental document such as the Territorial Agenda (TA) 2030 confirms

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the importance of a place-based approach and the role of instruments such as CLLD/LEADER in reducing territorial disparities (TA 20 p. 2020). Beyond the recognition of the importance of the LEADER development method, the literature has indeed explored the specificities and added value of this method in very different depths and scopes, according to a wide range of approaches. In the context of democracy, some authors have argued that LEADER can be seen as a novel form of local democracy, due to its local character and inclusiveness. Authors such as Pykkänen (2004), Karhio (2000), Pykkänen and Hyyryläinen (2004), Kull (2008), Godenhjelm et al. (2012), Wade and Rinne (2008), and Ramos and Mar Delgado (2003) have discussed LEADER as an experiment in democracy that renews or complements the representative political system and possibly provides accountability through increased participation. (Nousiainen 2015) The extensive, wide-ranging and sufficiently in-depth analyses carried out by the European Commission (EC Final Report 2021) reveal many of the added values of LEADER, but so far they have avoided the question of its connections with the most fundamental European values. While the perception of values – or added value – is closely linked to the particular state arrangements (Polletman et al. 2020), it is important, as they point out, to examine empirically how partnership – a core value of EU development policy for almost half a century – and interconnected networks are developed at the local level, how they relate to other scales of regional and national governments, and how they work to shape innovative responses (Jørgensen et al. 2021). Meanwhile, the development of LEADER Local Action Groups puts the participation and territory of active stakeholders at the heart of EU regional policy development and implementation. Local Action Groups can be seen as "local institutionalisation and a legally binding formalisation of the partnership principle" (Courades & Brosei, 2018, p. 220), which in turn forms the basis of the active subsidiarity principle (Moodie et al. 2021, p. 13). It is precisely the LEADER approach, specifically designed to strengthen territorial governance within European rural policy through Local Action Groups to improve the density and quality of economic and social networks involved in programming, project development and cooperation, that can represent the implementation of subsidiarity (Pisani et al. 2017, p. 95).

The evaluation of the efficiency of a development method, or even of a development policy period as a whole, is as central to EU development policy research as the assessment of the added value of individual interventions. Added value is the end result of a process, the scientific study of which, or even putting it into a political spotlight, can often appear more popular than identifying and analysing the conditions that have a decisive influence on the existence of added value, the reality and the degree of success. A good example of this is the recent special report² by the European Court of Auditors on the LEADER development method, which begins with the rather catchy headline 'LEADER and community-led local development facilitates local engagement, but additional benefits still not sufficiently demonstrated'.

To find an answer to the question of added value, at least three simultaneously and inextricably linked elements need to be examined:

- the distinctive features of the LEADER development approach compared to other development interventions;
- the objective which the development method is intended to serve and in the light of which it can be assessed and interpreted whether interventions using specific methods can produce any additional results;
- the conditions without which no LEADER development intervention can be implemented;

The conditions for the CLLD/LEADER approach, being a territorial-rural development method, must simultaneously be examined at EU, member state and local-regional levels. A level-by-level analysis should be based on a horizontal type of any evaluation (without it, problems and possible solutions, responsibilities and the addressees of the optimal allocation of tasks will be blurred, and therefore no consistent proposals for solutions can be elaborated either).

² Special Report 10/2022: LEADER and community-led local development facilitates local engagement but additional benefits still not sufficiently demonstrated

The definition of indicators, sources, measurability and appropriate measurement methods are further important, separate issues for the assessment of added value. It can be predicted that the report as a whole and the individual findings have several shortcomings in this context.

2. The methodology applied

The methodology applied is presented in two different dimensions and weights at the same time. On the one hand, it includes the methods used in the elaboration of the present study, which are based on the findings of the literature, the documents of various EU bodies, the ex-post evaluation of the Hungarian rural development programme and the report of the European Court of Auditors, and on the empirical experience of decades of research, LEADER and municipal management.

On the other hand, it includes an evaluation of the methodology used by the ECA report itself in order to highlight the soundness, or lack thereof, of its conclusions. It is important to stress that this is not a presentation of the results of a single research project, but a synthesis of decades of experience based on a combination of local-regional-national functions and research activities. This is also partly indicated by the fact that, where possible, the justification and support for the findings is provided through real-life examples and through direct lived experience.

3. Distinctive features

The answer to the question of what is distinctive about LEADER is very simple. The distinctive features are not only the seven principles declared (in part or in part) in the literature (Thuesen 2014), but also in Community legislation. Of these, it is perhaps local and regional development that is worth highlighting because, of all the principles, it is perhaps the one that is most likely to increase the cost of implementation compared with centrally driven traditional sectoral development (operational programmes). And the report concludes that *'given the additional costs and risks involved compared to other funding models and the fact that its benefits have not yet been demonstrated'* (p. 6).

3.1 Identifying the scope for a place-based approach versus insensitivity to place-area specificities

In the institutional system of development policy – at least in Hungary – the LEADER Local Action Groups are attached to the local level. It is certainly more expensive to run an institutional system at the territorial scale, which is closest to the local level, than to maintain an office unit with a single national centre and presumably fewer staff. (It is perhaps evidence, however, that public functions have been divided between local-regional-central bodies since roughly the existence of the state. The simple reason for this is that the central level is not suited to dealing with the – typically much larger – number of local tasks, for a variety of reasons while the sensitivity of grassroots organisations to social issues has an unquestionable added value (Lopolito et al. 2011, p. 48)). The need to operate local-territorial bodies, which in most cases necessarily entails higher costs than a central body, should not be an issue. What is a local issue in an ever-changing environment and what form of organisation local tasks take is a question. There is perhaps no doubt that development as a task can be understood at local, regional and central level as well. However, determining the right balance between the different levels is a much more specific – and politically sensitive – issue.

When evaluating development policy instruments, the question of which instrument (type of intervention) is suitable for achieving which objective at a given territorial scale becomes an unavoidable question. In Hungary, a separate central programme was launched in the second half of the 2000s to assist the 33 most disadvantaged small regions in catching up. Unfortunately, however, this programme did not bring about any substantial changes in the most important problems (e.g., employment). At the same time, a LEADER programme in one of the most disadvantaged areas concerned introduced an integrator (vegetable growing and processing) programme which in many small villages was able to reach people who, as long-term unemployed, would have had the least chance of re-entering the labour market in the absence of a local employer. Why was this initiative successful? It was because the programme leaders

were people with local roots, known and trusted by the target group, and their own work of persuasion based on tangible results (they received more money every delivery, i.e., every two weeks) had an attitude-forming effect that not only significantly improved their livelihoods, but also made continuous employment a part of their lifestyle. (Interestingly, it was women who were the first to take on a meaningful role in the implementation of the programme.) On the "intervention side", local knowledge, personal contacts, flexibility, responsiveness and the right competences were necessary for the success of the programme. The importance of these LEADER specificities is not only highlighted in various reports, but also in the literature (Sollic 2018, p. 7). The question in these examples – and, fortunately, in a considerable number of others like them – is not what the added value is, and the extent to which this method is more efficient than the central operational programmes, but it is rather more important, whether results can be achieved in the catching-up of the most disadvantaged regions. The evidence clearly shows that central interventions have not been able to produce sustainable results, while local – LEADER-type – initiatives have. This also means that in many cases, and under certain circumstances, the LEADER approach is the only way to achieve the objectives of development policy at EU, national and local level. In other words, either the LEADER method is used, or the problems will not be solved, and no progress will be made in reducing territorial disparities, and indeed no progress will be made.

In the light of all this, even the assumption of the question – which refers to additional costs – is difficult to interpret when the Hamlet question (to be, or not to be) needs to be answered (which fundamentally contradicts the statement made on page 7 of the report, which treats the added value of the bottom-up LEADER method as a simple assumption – and presumably unproven for the project designers).

As regards the relationship between LEADER activities and social capital, some activities and their outcomes (personal presence, trust) are linked to the conceptual elements of social capital, while others (availability of information for decisions, speed of feedback, flexibility, etc.) are closer to the field of organisational management. It is difficult to identify the added value of LEADER activities with the conceptual scope of social capital, so proceeding from the distinctive features may still be effective.

3.2 Further examples of interrelations between added value and distinctive features

In practice, the added value of partnership and participation can be seen in projects that the community owns, protects and cares for – for example, watering the flowers in front of their house as a social project – can ensure *long-term sustainability* and is by far *cheaper* than hiring a park maintenance company. Conversely, in the case of narrow decisions made without community involvement, the most appropriate contractor may not be chosen, the park may not be where the local community wants it, the facility may not be used – so the investment itself may be a waste of money – it may not be protected and cared for (but the flowers may be plucked in a few days).

Innovative projects are characterised by the fact that, precisely because of their innovative features, they often do not fit into the rigid support conditions of a traditional operational programme (Lukesch et al. 2020, p. 10), e.g., the development of a recirculation fish farm, but there are also numerous other examples, where the added value is not only the novelty itself but also the possibility of operating in disadvantaged areas, economic (green) production processes, job creation in an environment where no other type of investment can do so. (On the link between the LEADER approach and innovation in Spain and Italy, see Francisco et al (2018). Innovation, like any other distinctive feature, has its own preconditions, but very often these preconditions fall far short of the opportunities that the LEADER development method offers (Dax et al. 2013).

Networking (e.g., the coordinated development of the infrastructure of castles forming part of the built heritage of an area and the events and programmes that make up their content) means increasing the tourist attraction at regional level, contributing to the development of the area and reducing territorial disparities.

The reasons for success or failure, and hence the question of added value, are far from being confined to the distinctive features. (In the absence of these conditions, the LEADER approach can only exist in

a theoretical framework and is therefore incapable of producing the added value it is intended to produce, which is its real mission.)

3.3 The question of complementary or gap filling role

The impact, results, efficiency, measurability and quantifiability of added value, as well as a detailed analysis of its positive or negative values compared to other development methods, can be the subject of separate research, studies and evaluations. However, before all this, it is necessary to draw attention to the specific characteristics of the LEADER approach, which may be of particular importance in terms of the place and role of the LEADER approach within development policy. Experience has shown that LEADER added value does not, in most cases, mean – to illustrate it by a simple example – the specific methods applied to apple growing, which make the apples more beautiful, tastier and cheaper but rather whether apples are produced or not. If no LEADER programme exists, then, as it has already been pointed out, a great deal of development projects is simply not implemented *kerül* (Masot-Alonso, 2017, p. 321, Aterton et al. 2020, p. 6), because other development opportunities are not available to LEADER beneficiaries, without assistance there is no initiative, no cooperation, no collaboration, etc. In these cases, LEADER plays a gap-filling role in development policy, rather than a complementary one. In a fewer number of cases, a complementary role may also be played (e.g., the service exists, but LEADER development makes it more accessible, or it may be more widespread, or it may produce a higher quality product, etc.). In such cases, a comparative analysis – which may show differences, better results with other interventions – may be more rational, while in the "have or not" cases, in the absence of a suitable benchmark, a broader, macro-contextual assessment may be more suitable to reflect the extent of added value. This also means that, contrary to some early findings in the literature, the question is not whether this development method has a socio-economic impact, but to what extent, in what direction and on what spatial scale (Berriet-Sollicec et al. 2018).

4. The objective as a benchmark for added value, a point of reference

The relation between the added value and the costs of LEADER-type interventions, the issues of efficiency, and of the ratio, of course cannot be judged in themselves, but rather in the light of the objective pursued and actually achieved. It is therefore useful, in any evaluation, to identify the objective in the context the added value and the work and money are spent (e.g.: Evaluation Support Study on the Impact of Leader on Balanced Territorial Development Final Report, 2021).

If LEADER is not a method of agricultural development within the Common Agricultural Policy – and no one probably thinks it is – then this development method may be more closely linked to cohesion policy, which has a legally declared objective of reducing territorial disparities (Article 174 TFEU). At local level, development strategies obviously set out several objectives, but they must all be linked to a fundamental and primary objective, without which there would be no intervention or support at EU level. The added value, the effectiveness of the intervention, can be judged in the light of the achievement of this objective (even if the programme is not exclusively targeted at less developed areas).

The experience gained so far is excellent proof that development activities aimed at reducing territorial disparities within a country can only be successful if the CLLD/LEADER approach is used (even if such initiatives are not only or not primarily implemented within the LEADER programme). In our experience, there is no alternative other than the LEADER approach to the development of the less favoured regions.

5. Conditions

To draw far-reaching conclusions about a development method, one or a few ad-hoc investigations of a superficial nature are not sufficient. If the conditions are not known, or the conditions for the realisation of added value cannot be met, how can the performance of any development method, even an excellent one, be judged (how can a beautiful rose grow and bloom in the desert, what will mountain shepherds do when they must control the robots of a chip factory?)

While it is the distinctive features that determine whether a LEADER-type intervention is being implemented at all, it is the conditions – or more precisely, the fact whether they are met or not – that indicate whether the LEADER approach will be effective, successful or, on the contrary, whether the LEADER method should not be applied (the programme implemented bears LEADER in its name only). If the conditions are not monitored, it is not even possible to guess what is causing the success or failure of this development method in terms of the final result, i.e., the added value. An evaluation that seeks to draw constructive conclusions must not disregard the need for in-depth studies of which the conditions are an obvious part.

For the LEADER approach to prevail, the following conditions must be met:

- political support and genuine partnerships,
- room for manoeuvre in decision-making,
- adequate funding,
- competences and skills within the organisation,
- territorial scale tailored to the activity and the specificities of the development method,
- the procedures applied (complexity, simplicity).

Each of these conditions is closely interlinked and built upon the others, and the absence of any one of them can make the LEADER approach impossible to implement. If there is no political support – e.g., no decisions are taken to ensure programme implementation – and there are no partnerships – LEADER organisations are seen as subordinate side characters, without the need for their involvement or consultation – the implementation of a programme as a whole will be impossible (LEADER will merely serve as a label). If there is political support (at least without opposition), but no room for manoeuvre, because centrally created legislation or contractual provisions already dictate almost everything, then the limited role of implementation makes the locally specific initiative impossible. If there is political support and room for manoeuvre, but no resources are available for implementation, then all the previous activities are redundant and there is nothing to be resolved. If the previous three conditions are met, but the management lacks the competences and attitudes needed to address local problems (e.g., social sensitivity) or to exploit opportunities (initiative, expertise in the field), this development method is indistinguishable from development interventions based on traditional (Weberian) bureaucratic apparatus or New Public Management agencies. In a close analogy with this, if the operational area is too large, the personal presence of the management and the accessibility of the target group is not guaranteed, then the LEADER approach itself will not prevail either. If all the previous conditions are met, but the procedures are so complicated that they discourage potential beneficiaries (or even cause measurable damage through delays and the news of this is circulated), then this last condition will undermine all the previous efforts to achieve successful implementation at all territorial levels.

However, it is not sufficient to examine the fulfilment – or even the lack of fulfilment – of the conditions at only one level, as indicated in Article 26 of the report (*'The Member States should create the right conditions for local action groups to fulfil their tasks, in particular to bring different local stakeholders together and to support them in developing projects that provide benefits for local development.'*). Moreover, it is necessary to examine not only the conditions in a given area, but also the LEADER approach as a whole, including its internal context, and it is also necessary to examine beyond the Member State level what the role and responsibility of the EU and – where relevant – the local level, is in terms of meeting the conditions. A full (competence) analysis of these three territorial levels can be used to identify why conditions are not met and the possible reasons for this. (Unfortunately, the report does not include a competence analysis at territorial level, although in case of applying a development method that reflects a multi-level governance mechanism (as well), it can never be sufficient to focus on one territorial level actor only.)

5.1 Political support, genuine partnership

Member state level. As already stated in the EESC report³ by Roman Haken, political support is essential for the successful implementation of LEADER/CLLD and, through it, multi-level governance. If the central development policy philosophy is completely at odds with the LEADER approach, it is very difficult to achieve results in such a 'headwind', with a total lack of public support. The interconnections between the constitutional set-up of each Member State – federal, regional, decentralised, unitary – and the successful implementation of the LEADER programme have already been pointed out by some authors (Pollerman et al. 2020). Hungary is a unitary state with no tradition of power sharing between territorial levels. Unfortunately, even during the three decades since the change of regime, the political culture has not developed to a level that would help to support bottom-up, multi-level governance methods – and with them the division of responsibilities.

In the absence of an accepting, supportive environment and mechanisms for participatory democracy, the acceptance of local initiatives is even more subject to the subjective judgement of one or a few individuals in powerful positions (Dvořáková-Liřková et al. 2018). For example, in the first half of the 2007–2013 period, a positive decision was taken to allow LEADER organisations to support non-typical agricultural development (cultural heritage, basic services, rural tourism development). However, from 2010, an attempt at centralisation (micro-enterprises, tourism) was made, but following a not very successful centralised tender, the tasks were relegated back to local level. Until 2014, there was a partnership between the government and LEADER organisations (with intensive monitoring committee work, organised meetings and events). After 2014, not only did the partnership start to weaken, but for almost a year and a half, due to a long Community legislative interpretation process, the government did not provide any operational funding to LEADER organisations. As a result, several LEADER organisations became inoperative or only formally functioned, while their management looked for alternative employment elsewhere. Meanwhile, in other countries, for example, the central government provided state guarantees for operational loans, so that the transition between the two programming periods could be smooth. On the eve of the 2021–2027 programming period – or more precisely the 2020–2022 transition period – the formal elements of cooperation in Hungary ceased to exist (monitoring committee participation, joint events, official meetings all ceased to exist).

Partnership, especially at the threshold of a new programming period, can become a key element in the collective formulation of plans for the future.

In Hungary, LEADER organisations were not formally involved in the rural development planning process for the 2021–2027 programming period, despite several official initiatives (the Managing Authority was not aware of any such obligation under Article 4(1)(IV) of Commission Regulation (EU) No 240/2014 of 7 January 2014

It is difficult to see how it would have been a problem to get a broad understanding of society and of certain professional positions, to incorporate innovative ideas, or even to plant the seeds of interest in the future, or even to think in community.

Perhaps it is not a side note that it took 3.5 years from the adoption of the Hungarian "rural development programme" (22.07.2015) to the issuing of the first supporting documents (from 02.2019) as there was a clearly perceptible preference for the new calls for proposals for measures with more significant resources than LEADER, or for new domestically funded proposals, as opposed to LEADER." According to the afore mentioned, "the longest time was spent on the publication of local calls for proposals and the establishment of the conditions for the handling of applications." (Final Evaluation Report p. 43–44). This raises the question on what hope can be expected for the success of the LEADER programme, in terms of added value (and we are only talking about the first half of the first condition).

EU level. This kind of negligence of partnership may not even be noticeable on the surface (EU level), as – due to the absence of deeper investigations – formally, everything (socialisation, consultation) seems to

³ Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Community Led Local Development (CLLD) as a tool of Cohesion Policy 2014–2020 for local, rural, urban and peri-urban development 11 December 2014

run normally. It is a question of whether there can be any consequences to the apparent anomalies clearly seen from the underside perspective, which can measure and correct the weight or weightlessness of partnership – or rather of a democratic functioning. To answer this question, although not perfectly, but a concrete case can serve as a basis, in which a national organisation turned to the EU Commission, mainly to obtain the EU's opinion on the planning and 'partnership' practice outlined above. In its written reply, the Commission expressed its commitment to the principle of partnership and to the application of the EU-level legislation aimed at ensuring its implementation. It also stated that the legislation and the application of the principles would be monitored. However, it was evasive in its assessment of the specific facts and the situation of non-compliance, mainly referring to the fact that decisions are taken by Member States on the basis of the principle of shared management (which was not disputed by anyone at the hearing, but "only" that decisions or procedural actions were in non-compliance with EU rules). In this interpretation, however, partnership, multi-level governance and shared management are not competing and mutually exclusive principles or methods of governance, but complementary values and mechanisms that ensure the implementation of legislation, not its circumvention, and that guarantee the rule of law at both EU and national level.) As the European Ombudsman's decision put it, "the fact that the Commission is not directly responsible for the management of funds can never be a justification for not acting in cases where fundamental rights are infringed or at risk of being infringed" (European Ombudsman 2015. p. 1).

So, what did the Commission say yes to, what did it consider acceptable, and right, after being informed of the facts and their thorough examination?

The Commission found that it was probably right that the preparation of the operational programmes was carried out, almost in total secrecy, by the sectoral ministries. It is also probably not a problem that the partnership is almost exclusively limited to providing information to the public at large during the planning stage. Nor does it seem to be a problem that the fate of any proposals that might have been drafted is unknown. It may also seem appropriate for the Commission not to have formally involved any of the stakeholders in a specific field, namely rural development, on an issue that affects a very wide section of society (LEADER), and to have deliberately neglected the only representative organisation.

If EU values, including EU development policy, do not apply to a Member State, or only in a particular context, then it is appropriate to expect one of the most important EU bodies, the Commission, to protect them. (Pazos-Vidal 2019). The cohesion policy – one of the most important policies of the EU – the violation of European values (including partnership or multi-level governance) has not reached the threshold of a significant reaction (e.g., in the form of an inquiry, an evaluation). The fact that this could nevertheless happen could fundamentally shake confidence in the EU's institutions and the authority of the EU as a whole. In such a case, organisations and citizens who are left all alone may feel that they have nowhere to turn for help. This can increase the self-confidence of governments who believe that there are never any consequences for ignoring Community law. At the same time, for citizens and their organisations with lost ambition, apathy and disinterest, the partnership, existing on a documentary basis anyway, and the meaning of multilevel governance, which is no longer known even in slogans, will disappear forever as a means of conveying the EU's message. And the narrowing of the core values, instead of bringing them closer together and catching up, will increase the distance and widen the gap between the Member States and the vision of the European Union and of a united Europe.

The question is then to what extent LEADER can add value in such an EU and Member State context and contribute to proving the legitimacy of this development method.

5.2 Room for manoeuvre in decision-making

At the local level, everyday experience shows that the LEADER development method, the involvement of citizens and their organisations, as well as entrepreneurs and municipalities, can only make sense if there is something to decide on and if decisions can have consequences. This, therefore, implies a kind of task (and power) sharing, along with ensuring the conditions for decision implementation.

Regulation at the EU level is consistent in ensuring the autonomy and room for manoeuvre for decision-making necessary to enforce local specificities. However, it does not provide any safeguards that could effectively resolve an undesirable situation in the event of a non-compliance with this requirement by a Member State. While multi-level governance has been integrated into EU development policy legislation since 2014, it can influence the style of interaction between (and within) the different levels and institutions of the development system, the degree of autonomy at local level, the administrative procedures used and the autonomy of local partnership in general (Pollermann 2014), it seems that MLG remains a principle that does not seem to be a priority to be enforced at EU level.

As far as the central (Hungarian national) legislative framework and the practice of the managing authorities are concerned, there have never been any direct restrictions on the decision-making powers of LEADER organisations or any attempt to interfere in local decisions in Hungary. Indirectly, the legal framework, especially in the 2007–2013 period, often limited the room for manoeuvre for decision-making that would have facilitated the support of innovative activities (e.g., the relevant activity was not included in the centrally defined eligible costs and therefore the project was not eligible).

5.3 Adequate funding

At local level, to mitigate regional disparities, it is essential to provide the critical mass⁴ of resources needed to put the economy on a growth path (this was not guaranteed in the 2007–2013 period, but in the 2014–2020 period, resources have been so drastically reduced that more capital-intensive businesses in more developed regions were no longer willing to apply. To illustrate this, the municipalities, businesses and NGOs of a LEADER organisation covering two districts (LAU 1) of 45 municipalities were allocated enough money (€1 095 000) over seven years to build one roundabout on a main road in 2015. The way in which the countryside and the LEADER programme have been perceived in this way has raised serious questions on values ever since.

For rural areas, the key problem remains that regional development funds have not been allocated to rural areas, and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) targets and resources for the period 2021–2027 have become so urban-centred that they are increasing rather than reducing territorial disparities. Meanwhile, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) will have its objectives and resources reduced to support for agriculture.

The centrally agreed LEADER programme, based on a minimum 5% share of EAFRD funds, based on a minimum 5% share of EAFRD centrally agreed funds and covering the entire rural areas of the country, has such low resources that it is not only unable to have a significant impact on reducing territorial disparities, but also poses a serious limit to the added value of the LEADER approach. (As a footnote, at the start of the planning for the 2014–2020 period, Commission representatives indicated the risk of fragmentation of resources if the programme continued with full national coverage. At the end of the planning process, a negotiation took place between the relevant minister and the Commission's top management, after which the level of funding was no longer criticised. The political bargaining in the background may therefore override the professional aspects at EU level.)

Until there is a change of approach at EU level, which does not regard LEADER as a playground for local actors with minimum resources, and until the assessment of local initiatives is based on risk rather than on innovation and the chance of a (unique) impact on territorial equalisation, while central governance is more important than confidence in good local decisions, the (quantifiable) added value exceeds the percentage of 5% that corresponds to the funding rate only because the work of local actors, often altruistic and voluntary, significantly increases it. However, this does not mean that, with its very low level of funding in relation to its tasks, it will ever be able to achieve 100% of its inherent potential.

The financing context for realising the potential benefits of the LEADER development method therefore greatly reduces, if not excludes, the emergence of added value. The fundamental objective of reducing territorial disparities under Article 174 may become unattainable. Nevertheless, the Hungarian *ex post*

⁴ OPINION OF THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (2013/C 17/05) on Community-led Local Development, Article 28

evaluation concludes that 'the relatively few LEADER resources, through the involvement of the LEADER HACS and their local calls for proposals, have facilitated the development of a very large number of beneficiaries, in which the HACS working organisations have played a prominent role. The experience of the case study interviews shows that small NGOs and micro-enterprises clearly have a unique opportunity to benefit from the development resources provided by the LEADER measure" (*Final Evaluation Report p. 54*).

In Article 57 of the ECA Special Report, it was criticised that LEADER also financed such projects that would otherwise be considered as statutory tasks of national, regional or municipal authorities. From a distance, it can be broadly agreed that LEADER should not finance an objective that should be financed by the Member State or the municipalities. However, a closer look reveals that local government acts do not make development an obligatory task, but rather operation (and assign some funding – normative or task-based – to it, but this does not apply to the funding of already completely diverse local development ideas). If we take a closer look at the situation in Hungary – but probably in other Central and Eastern European Member States – we see that the resources made available for operation are often not even sufficient to fulfil the specific task, and development can only take place if additional local revenue or external funding is available. However, the majority of rural municipalities – at least in Hungary – do not have any substantial revenue of their own, and the Structural Funds, as mentioned above, mainly support the cities (and the sources of funding for non-state tenders are either uncertain or non-existent). In such cases, the only chance is the local LEADER programme, but only for modest development ideas. If this were not available, rural municipalities – especially those with a small population – would have no access to development funding at all. This does not mean, of course, that the LEADER programme should finance local pavement construction, but it does mean that it should be able to support local authority development that is in accordance with Article 174 and that, if possible, also has an added value for the area, if there is no other option.

5.4 Territorial scale tailored to the activity and the specificities of the development method

The choice of the optimal territorial scale is not only related to the concentration or fragmentation of resources (Pollerman et al. 2020), but also – and particularly important for this development method – to accessibility, the availability of local information, the personal presence linked to the relational capital, the soft conditions of development objectives (motivation, trust, etc.), and the overall characteristics of the bottom-up approach. In other words, if the geographical area is too large for the staff of the organisation responsible for development to be known and accessible, if the people responsible for implementing the planning are not familiar with local characteristics and needs, if they are unable to motivate the disadvantaged inhabitants of peripheral areas and build up a relationship based on trust, this development method cannot be successful. The definition of the optimal territorial scale is of course influenced by geographical conditions (accessibility), the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the spatial unit (social, economic, environmental), the population size and the number of settlements, but in the case of Hungary the most appropriate scale is defined as the area of one district (LAU 1). In comparison, the majority of Hungarian LEADER organisations operate in an area twice as large, and in 2012 county representatives even suggested that the LEADER programme could be taken over by the county government (NUTS level 3), as the new Local Government Act has also assigned them a rural development task. This idea was strongly opposed by Commission representatives (DG AGRI), who stressed that LEADER is a local development programme. Nevertheless, a vote was taken in the monitoring committee of the rural development programme, although the initiative was not supported by the majority.

It is an important question whether the decision at EU level, which is rather broadly based on population size and density, refers only to the issue of territorial scale, is sufficient to promote the LEADER approach and added value, or whether more detailed requirements should be set.

5.5 Competences and skills

In itself, a management with sufficient staff availability is no guarantee of success for an organisation with a development profile. In addition to the need for a team with a high level of creativity, motivation and interpersonal skills, and knowledge of EU and national development objectives, a team with the expertise to provide the complexity that the region needs (in peripheral regions, a greater emphasis on human resources development specialists, alongside colleagues with expertise in IT, construction and other infrastructure development) would be needed (Opria et al. 2021).

In Hungary, the main part of the work of LEADER management is the administrative and tendering activity, which is mostly carried out on behalf of the paying agency or managing authority. (This experience is not in accordance with the findings of the Hungarian ex post evaluation, which identified only 49% of the administrative activity.) Of course, due to staffing constraints, – an average of 2.5 people/working organisation – teamwork is out of the question, while the need for a completely different set of skills and competences from those required for the provision of administrative tasks has never been assessed and demanded at EU, national or local level.

At EU level, there is no rule addressing the issue of staffing, which is an essential condition for the LEADER approach to be effective while the literature – based on empirical studies – has largely identified those (Thuesen 2014). The question is whether it is right to leave it 100% to the Member States to define the requirements for this condition (which is either met or not), based on the principle of shared management, or whether it is worthwhile to establish a minimum guaranteed framework at EU level. The issue does not appear to be entirely a completely open one either, because Community law deals with personnel issues, but only in terms of the composition of the decision-making body and largely from a conflict of interest perspective. The ECA Special Report also covers personnel issues, but experience shows that they are much less important in areas such as gender composition and representativeness (e.g., lack of younger generations) (*ECA Special Report p. 28*). Questions may indeed arise for evaluators or researchers who do not have in-depth knowledge of the actual functioning of the region and its social conditions and who have only superficial experience of its functioning, but these questions can be answered in a reassuring way on the basis of decades of experience. With regard to the composition of decision-making bodies, it is not gender, age or the direct representation of a social group that is decisive, but the personal qualities of the decision-maker in question. Several studies (Navarro 2016) and research reports (Commission) deal with the rather one-sided aspects of inclusion and participation, but they do not go into the depth of the essential elements and purposes of representativeness. It is possible, in fact, that there may be no or few twenty-somethings in a decision-making body, but this is not a problem if one of the older mayor's main objectives is to keep young people in the area and he or she does everything possible to do this when formulating the local development strategy. At the same time, it is pointless for a representative of a Roma organisation to be involved in a decision-making body if he or she never comes, but the decision-making body as a whole supports the application that provides a form of support for this target group. The high number of mayors in the decision-making body may seem to be a problematic issue, but it should be borne in mind that in the most disadvantaged, low-population municipalities there are no NGOs and local entrepreneurs rarely play a community role. Meanwhile, the philosophy of mayors – and of the decision-making body as a whole – (and even its own internal procedures) is to give priority to entrepreneurs (as the sole employers or taxpayers in the municipalities) and to civic initiatives (without which even a minimum of cultural life or the force of community cohesion and population retention would be lacking). They do all this out of personal conviction, by making decisions that (self-)limit the public sphere (e.g., in terms of the proportion of resources available for use). If the personal factors (motivations, attitudes) are not adequate, then it makes no difference whose representative and whose gender is making the decision – in some cases – rather for their personal benefit than for the benefit of the community.

The practical applicability of the unwritten (and written) rules (Furmankiewicz 2021), which are also known in the literature, is based on these soft personal factors.

5.6 The procedures applied

The procedures and procedural issues applied are a key area of evaluation not only in the EU but also in Hungary. The ECA evaluation refers in several points to the complexity, length and inflexibility of the procedural system. The Hungarian ex post evaluation also makes a number of observations on the problems and consequences of the procedural system, such as: "*the rigid procedural system caused problems for the low innovation content*" (p. 31), "*...that these projects were also faced with the same administrative burden as the much higher value developments*" (p. 32), "*Despite the relatively low maximum amounts of funding set by the HACCS, the requirements for the supporting documents have not been eased.*" (p. 32) The ECA Special Report also points out in Article 26, mentioned above, that for the LEADER approach to be effective, "*they should give local action groups autonomy and keep their administrative burden to a minimum.*" (ECA Special Report p. 19.)

If the procedures have such a significant impact on the assessment of the LEADER programme and its added value, it is reasonable to ask who is responsible for this, i.e., which level of decision-making is authorised to develop the procedures and optimise them to ensure the success of the LEADER approach. This optimisation is far outside the scope of simplification, which is a never-ending issue at both Community and Member State level and is an indication that there has been no breakthrough, to say the least (Shucksmith et al. 2021). It is regrettable that simplification slogans do not include differentiation and fine-tuning of the rules. The direct consequence of this is that there is no Community-level requirement or regulation that would be able to make a distinction between a EUR 200 and a EUR 2 000 000 project. In the case of small-scale, low-risk, simple investments, events and training – and the majority of LEADER grants, for example, fall into this category – there is a legitimate expectation of a type of differentiation that is proportionate to the level of support. The risk-based approach, which is more likely to emerge at Community level, and the various funding procedures do not meet this requirement, nor do the rules laid down at national level. (Commission Regulation (EC) No 1975/2006 2007–2013 did indeed stipulate that certain rules should be based on Axis 4. However, this was not the practice then, nor is it now.)

It is also necessary to bear in mind that the export of LEADER into the mainstream has caused serious damage to innovation, which is a LEADER specificity, precisely because of the normative procedural rules of the main stream.

It is deeply regrettable that the EU, and even the Hungarian, procedures are based on distrust. However, this is not a Hungarian specificity, as some studies – in Poland – already pointed this out in 2010. (Furmankiewicz 2012, p. 15). This distrust can escalate to a level where the applicant is a potential criminal, and the applicant is seen as a real criminal unless he can prove his innocence. This leads to a procedural spiral in which the driving force is the unreasonable-to-unrealistic pressure to provide proof (which, not incidentally, is a huge administrative and time-consuming task). This statement seems to be confirmed by the second paragraph of the preamble to Commission Regulation (EC) No. 1975/2006, stating that 'In order to ensure that controls have a deterrent effect, payments should not, as a general rule, be made before the verification of applications for funding has been completed.' As long as deterrence, distrust, and sanction form the backbone of a procedural philosophy, as long as a small minority punishes the majority, as long as good faith is a familiar concept from civil law, and the presumption of innocence known from criminal law cannot be exercised, the goals and messages of the EU can reach those local stakeholders whose main goal is to help, in a distorted way and with a completely different content.

In light of the above, the question arises as to what the decision-makers at EU and Member State (Hungarian) level have done to differentiate, fine-tune and adapt to the specificities of LEADER. The answer is simple: almost nothing. At the EU level, there have been several attempts to develop and apply simplified cost accounting methods, but these do not offer any differentiation possibilities that would help simplification within the LEADER programme. In the case of payments, the formulation of simplified rules for the administration and settlement of applications with a low financial risk and a small amount of support (e.g., EUR 10 000) would be advisable at EU level.

At the Member State level, there could be further differentiation, which would be in conflict with the tendency to use templates, which could provide a framework for flexibility at the decision-making stage, while at the same time incorporating elements of transparency and accountability. A drastic reduction in the (largely seemingly pointless) requirements imposed at the payment stage could significantly contribute to speeding up the implementation of payments.

Local procedures (where they exist) should also be reviewed. In Hungary, local procedures do exist, but experience shows that they have very little impact on the speed and flexibility of administration (because they have already been limited by mainly national, and to a lesser extent EU rules).

It is worth highlighting that the ECA Special Report includes integrated funding among the procedural issues. It is important to note that the complex approach, which should be a distinctive feature of the LEADER method, is only a fraction of the procedural issue, and that multi-funding is only one (albeit important) element of the integrated approach. There is perhaps no doubt that coordination at EU level is the first and most important stage in the funding arrangements for each fund. In its absence, Member States cannot be expected to eliminate inconsistencies or incompatible requirements that may arise from incoherent Community rules. The fragmentation of EU development policy into different funds in itself questions the possibility of a complex approach, which would require a paradigm shift at EU level (e.g., a single development fund). If, by some miracle, ministries at Member State level, putting their own portfolio interests first, were to seek to achieve complex development at regional level, coordinating successive, interdependent or, in some cases, parallel development activities financed by different funds, especially under the current tendering system, seems an impossible task.

Without appropriate differentiation of the procedural rules, a flexible framework to ensure innovation, a simplified procedure based on the amount of resources requested and adapted to the capacities of local stakeholders (e.g., human resources, shortcomings in broadband) and proportionate to their needs, not only the desired added value but also the whole LEADER approach will be undermined.

6. Questions of measurement and measurability

Perhaps it can be agreed that the results that mark the achievement of the objectives can be used to define the method of measurement and the set of efficiency indicators that can be assessed. If the objectives are constantly being changed completely isolated from the legal basis, if it is difficult to trace the causal link between results and objectives, if the indicators are only partially or not at all suitable for reflecting results and measuring efficiency, it is difficult to assess the past and even more difficult to formulate sound proposals for the future. The report's findings on the lack of a link between the indicators currently used and added value (ECA Special Report, p. 49, p. 30) are not very controversial. If the concept of added value (social capital) is not clarified (ECA Special Report, p. 62, p. 35), the choice of appropriate indicators and, more importantly, the choice of appropriate measurement methods, may remain unclear. It is therefore indeed a reasonable requirement that the individual elements (objective, expected results, indicators, measurement methods) should be put in place, i.e., that the logical chain of cause and effect relationships between them should form an unquestionable coherence (this may also clarify, *inter alia*, the scope of quantifiable and non-quantifiable results, which are difficult to interpret and assess from an auditor's perspective, and which are capable of demonstrating added value in a clear manner.)

As regards the specification of the measurement methods, which are obviously closely linked to the basic issues of qualitative and quantitative measurability, a more detailed assessment is not appropriate here. (It is assumed that the expertise and infrastructure available to the evaluators will largely ensure the use of a fairly wide range of evaluation tools that can be used to get closer to the identification of LEADER added value.) However, it is fully agreed that the Commission should follow the principle of starting with evaluation when revising the existing legislation (ECA Special Report, p. 5) (It should be noted that this emphasis is important not only for the LEADER programme, but also for any other intervention initiated by other funds.)

Thus, in terms of indicators, measurement and measurability, again essentially at EU level, the overall picture is not entirely clear. This does not exempt any evaluator from using existing documents and data

that can validate added value. Thus, for example, if the report had been based on the Committee's previous and most recent⁵ reports, it would probably have broadened the horizon considerably with regard to the objective of the ECA on page 31 – the impact of the LEADER part of the Rural Development Fund on balanced territorial development – on the basis of which the LEADER added value could have been more realistically assessed.

According to Article 54 of the ECA Special Report, the assessment of whether LEADER and community-led local development projects had the potential to contribute to local development and delivered enhanced results will be based, inter alia, on relevant monitoring data.

Hungarian monitoring data does not seem to have been available to the evaluators, which demonstrated the effectiveness of the LEADER approach in a sufficiently convincing – and, from an auditor's point of view, understandable and assessable – quantified form (*Table 1*).

Tab 1. The per unit cost of job creation⁶.

	Total staff increase commitments	Number of applications for funding staff increase commitments	Average number of staff commitments per application	Unit cost of job creation (HUF)
VP-M19.2.1 – Implementation of local development strategies	1 497	1382	1.1	6 356 754
VP6-6.4.1-16 Support for investments for the creation and development of non-agricultural activities	755	548	1.4	34 474 665
VP-M04.2.1-15 Adding value to agricultural products and promoting resource efficiency in processing activities	2 360	428	5.5	43 394 123
VP-M04.4.2.1-4.2.2-18 Adding value to agricultural products in processing activities	1 191	270	4.4	57 641 210

The table also shows that, compared to the traditional sectoral development method (central tendering), LEADER has helped to create jobs at one-tenth to one-fifth of the original cost. Although the geographical area concerned is not shown here, the number of applications for support also indicates that it covers the whole of the eligible areas (all municipalities with less than 10 000 inhabitants in Hungary) with a significant frequency.

If the report had indeed been based on the relevant monitoring data – and even in a single case if they seem to contradict the assumptions or the results obtained from other data – then perhaps it would not have made general statements of which unfoundedness could relatively easily be proved.

7. Conclusions

The recent European Court of Auditors' evaluation of a development instrument more than three decades old has certainly proved useful in one respect. It has contributed to a way of thinking that analyses not only the outcome of a process but also the causal link between the conditions without which the expected or anticipated result cannot be achieved, although it is these conditions which are the least frequently examined in the various evaluations.

⁵ NAT/806 Evaluation of the impact of the CAP on the development of rural areas (information report) 15. 04. 2021

⁶ Rural Development Programme ex-post evaluation pp. 82–83.

Although the practical experience-based argumentation does not seek to define the concept of added value, the logical link between the distinctive features of the LEADER development method and its directly gained benefits can provide a clear guidance to a closer definition of added value. While the distinctive features indicate whether or not it is a LEADER development method at all, the fulfilment or absence of conditions may indicate whether or not it is a development method that can work successfully.

The assessment of the conditions for a territorial-rural development instrument is inseparable from the evaluation of the role of each territorial level, or more precisely of each territorial actor. The evaluation of a development instrument is therefore an evaluation of the principles that underpin EU development policy, such as multi-level governance, subsidiarity and partnership. Experience has shown that, despite the existing EU legislation, these principles are not protected, even though they are the very principles that constitute the broadest conditions for the implementation of EU development policy values. The specific conditions and principles of the LEADER approach, which are closely linked to the general principles, would require the contribution of all territorial players, because only then can the expected added value for the development of rural areas become apparent.

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