
ROLE OF LOCAL ACTION GROUPS IN ADDRESSING REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN LATVIA

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Abstract

The objective of the paper research is to assess the role of the implementation of the local development strategies (LDS) elaborated by the local action groups (LAGs) in the regional development and addressing social problems in Latvia. The paper examines the role and place of LDS in territorial development planning in Latvia, carries out thematic analysis of the projects implemented under the LDS as well as tries to assess the LEADER approach impact on regional development and addressing of social issues on the local level. The authors use unpublished data on LEADER projects and apply quantitative and qualitative analysis methods. Most of LEADER projects have been implemented to facilitate the development of infrastructure related to recreation and quality leisure time as well as culture and sports. Rural inhabitants have noticed positive changes in their local territory introduced by the LEADER approach. Though, in order to enhance the role of LAGs and LDS in addressing regional development and social problems at local level, it is advisable that the potential interaction of the activities provided by all regional planning documents is observed when determining priorities at regional level (presently the place and role of the LDS has not been formally defined), while implementation of the LDS should pay more attention to long-term effects and even accomplishment of target priorities.

Key words: LEADER, local action group, local development strategy, rural development.

Introduction

Awareness of resources, opportunities and their optimal utilisation without depletion throughout Latvia, including rural areas, is a prerequisite for sustainable and balanced territorial development. In policy planning documents, rural area is defined as a sphere of national interests with outstanding value and significance for a sustainable development of the state, for preserving the identity, which includes strategic resources critical for the national development. However, in recent years the most typical trends in spatial development in Latvia are depopulation of rural areas and low density of population. This reduces the socialising opportunities as well as becomes a reason for limited availability of services: the distance to the places where services are provided increases, government funding for healthcare, transportation and education infrastructure is reduced, and rural areas are subject to unbalanced and uneven development.

With Latvia joining the European Union (EU), EU funds have become the most important financing source for territorial development. Latvian Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 stresses the importance of the LEADER approach to address such socio-economic problems as maintaining the rural areas populated, improvement of living standards by providing employment and availability of services, and encouraging the social activity of population, including education, culture, sports and recreation (MoA, 2014). The idea of LEADER is to improve living standards in the countryside, along with economic and social improvements and preserving the environment. It is being applied since 1991 in the EU as an instrument for addressing rural development

problems and encouraging development on the level of local rural communities. Contrary to other public measures, LEADER seeks for solutions possibly close to the local territory (bottom-up approach).

In Latvia, LEADER approach is being applied since 2000; however, only starting from 2007 it covers the whole country. LEADER approach is based on the local development strategies (LDS) developed by the local action groups (LAGs). In Latvia, under RDP 2007-2013 the LEADER approach was applied by 40 LAGs.

The objective of the paper research is to assess the role of the implementation of the local development strategies elaborated by the local action groups in the regional development and addressing social problems in Latvia. To reach the objective, the tasks have been set: 1) to evaluate the role and place of LDS in territorial development planning in Latvia, 2) to carry out thematic analysis of the projects implemented under the LDS and 3) to assess the LEADER approach impact on regional development and addressing of social issues on the local level.

Materials and Methods

The study analyses LEADER projects implemented within the Latvian RDP 2007-2013 under Measure 4.1.1. 'Improving Competitiveness of Local Development Strategies in the Territory' (data on 387 projects obtained on July 22, 2014), and Measure 4.1.3. 'Diversification of Rural Economy and Quality of Life for the Promotion of Local Development Strategies in the Territory' (data on 3216 projects obtained on January 30, 2014). The main sources of data for the study are unpublished data of the Rural Support

Service (RSS), territorial development planning documents (regional development programmes, local action group strategies etc.), research papers and reports of institutions, LAG survey data (evaluation of project dead-weight; survey carried out during May-September, 2014), CSB of Latvia data etc. Considering various impact directions of LEADER projects, all projects were grouped in three main thematic groups according to their purpose: rural economy; development and growth of society; and rural infrastructure and basic services. This grouping allowed to analyse similar projects and to evaluate and compare the results as well as determine the thematic focus of the LEADER projects in Latvia. Classification system was based on the European Commission methodological materials for the assessment of the impact of LEADER measure on the quality of life (DG Agri, 2010a; DG Agri, 2010b). For this paper part of the results of LSIAE study 'LEADER Measure and Measure 3.2.1 - Results and their Impact on Business Development in Latvian Rural Area' (with the participation of the authors) have been used.

The suitable qualitative and quantitative research methods have been used in the study: monographic; analysis and synthesis, concepts of Meta - analysis; survey; correlation, data grouping, logical constructive analysis etc.

Results and Discussion

Many researchers welcome the LEADER approach as a tool to deal with rural development challenges; however, the conclusions about its practical implications tend to be contradictory. It has been noted that the LEADER, unlike other public funding measures, values the role of social capital and focuses on the enhancement and use of its potential at the local level (Buller, 2000; Shortalls 2008), allowing to maintain the regional diversity in the EU - local traditions, lifestyle, cultural, historical and natural values (Becerra and Lastra-Bravo, 2010) and contributing to the learning of new skills, exchange of experience and improvement in cooperation, and reducing the indifference and passivity (Bruckmeier, 2000; Wellbrock et al., 2013). LEADER approach contributes to the endogenous development of the territory based on local resources and the bottom-up approach to planning (Kis et al., 2012) as well as contributes to the cooperation among entrepreneurs (Ploeg, 2006).

LEADER approach is based on the local development strategies, implemented by LAG, intended to solve the local problems and determine priorities for local development of the area. Some researchers emphasize the role of LAGs by naming them a territorial organizing force and the institution which on the local level implements and coordinates the rural development process (Kis et al., 2012;

Falkowski, 2013). However, in practice surveys of rural population indicate that people are ill-informed about the activities of LAG and are not familiar with the LDS developed by them. Also, the European Court of Auditors criticises the contents of the LDS (2007-2013) - concrete and territory-specific goals are missing in the documents, the results to be attained have been defined incompletely. As a document, LDS is expected to justify the existence of the LAG, reflecting its specific contribution to addressing the rural development issues, it should also offer arguments for the role planned for the LEADER approach in this process, yet the evaluation concludes that LDS are rather a formality in order to make the LAG territory eligible to public financing under LEADER (European Court of Auditors, 2010). RDP 2007-2013 mid-term evaluation report, in its turn, criticises the long-term impact of the activities implemented within the LDS: in short-term certain movement is triggered in the territory; however, these projects have no long-term contribution to the development of the territories (LSIAE, 2010a).

The place and role of LDS in Latvia in territorial development planning

Within the RDP 2007-2013 public financing of 39.2 mln EUR was available to the implementation of LEADER projects through LDS. A number of requirements have been set for the LDS development process and contents: they should have a vision, priorities and concrete actions towards facilitating development of rural areas, promoting innovation, strengthening the rural economics, providing quality of life to rural population (MoA, 2010). The local population and a variety of stakeholders should be involved in the development of LDS, and at the same time they should be coordinated with other planning documents binding on the LAG territory.

In Latvia, a strictly regulated territorial development planning system is in place, comprising policies and development planning and assuring their linking with financial planning as well as coherence and hierarchy of the decisions made by central and local government authorities. Given the requirements set out for the LDS contents, it can be perceived as a medium-term territorial development planning document. However, this is not so from the legal aspect, since 1) LAG, as public-private partnerships, are not subjects of the *Development Planning System Law*, 2) there is no place allotted to LDS in the Latvian territory development planning system hierarchy, 3) according to the *Territorial Development Planning Law* the local level development planning documents shall be drafted only by local governments. Thereby, the LDS exist and are being implemented parallel to other regional and local territorial planning documents, contributing to attaining their goals (LSIAE, 2010b).

However, neither the planning region nor the local government development documents specify the role of the LDS towards reaching of strategic goals, defined either on regional or local level (though in practice local governments take active part in the implementation of LEADER projects).

In order to identify the contribution and coherence of the LDS priorities and actions on the level of planning regions, the LDS have been compared with the priorities and actions in the development programmes of five planning regions. The comparison reflects how frequently the priorities and actions defined in regional level have been mentioned in the LDS. Such analysis enables to have a quality evaluation of the significance of each individual action in LDS as well as to judge on the expected implementation impact on the regional level.

While evaluating the mutual coherence, it has been observed that the priorities and subordinated directions of actions in the planning regions development

documents comprise all aspects of quality of life. Conversely, in the LDS intended actions, an emphasis on promotion of entrepreneurship, facilitation of employment, development of education, sports and culture infrastructure and improvement of availability of services dominate (see Table 1).

The Vidzeme planning region is the only region where rural development (including development of agricultural and non-agricultural activities, encouraging the initiative of local population and development of agriculture-related research and support institutions) has been elevated to the level of strategic priorities. Considering that the very idea of LDS actions is addressing the problems in rural areas, one can conclude that in the Vidzeme region LDS are conducive to the development process selected by the region.

As to the Latgale region LDS, the intention to *master knowledge and use it at work and in everyday life, local government administration and company*

Table 1

Comparison of the priorities in planning regions development documents with those in the LAG LDS

	Priorities in regional development programme	Emphasis of regional priorities and actions in the LDS actions*
Pierīga	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -high quality and development of human capital -region conveniently reached -competitive economy, diversified and active business -high quality environment for living -increase of the role and influence of the region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -availability of health care, social, education and culture infrastructure and services (38;2.5) -diversified activities in rural areas (31, 2.1) -enhanced urban environment quality 21, 1.4) -intensification of entrepreneurial activity (28; 2.1) -expanding of innovations in business (14; 0.9)
Vidzeme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -development of infrastructure and services -development of economy and competitiveness, targeting towards knowledge-intensive economy -development of human capital and employment -rural development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -development of education, culture and sports infrastructure (12; 1.5) -intensification of entrepreneurial activity (19; 1.9) -development of life-long learning (8; 1.0) -development of non-agricultural activities (12; 1.5) -development of agriculture (10; 1.2)
Kurzeme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to promote and diversify regional economy and to develop production - to enhance transport and infrastructure possibilities in the region - to invest in human capital and develop innovation culture -to create a high quality environment for living, to preserve nature environment and enhance the development of remote areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to facilitate the viability of populated areas and rural areas (27; 4.5) - to develop an infrastructure in support to businesses, to promote business and encourage innovations (11; 1.8) - to promote employment and improve the competitiveness of the labour force in the region (11; 1.8) - to create a favourable basis to investment and facilitate the development of high value added sectors and knowledge-based entrepreneurship (11, 1.8)
Zemgale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - an educated, creative and competitive individual - development of knowledge and economy - quality environment for living 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - development of business environment (14; 2.8) - development of culture and sports infrastructure and development of services (14; 2.8) - development of cultural and historical heritage and development of recreational environment (12; 2.4)
Latgale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - connections -efficient companies -skills -smart management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -availability of services (21; 3.5); -increase of company productivity and export potential, development of technologies and infrastructure (14; 2.5); -mastering knowledge and application at work and in everyday life, local government administration and company management (14; 2.5)

*the first figure in the brackets denotes the number of instances when a regional level priority action has been mentioned in the regional LDS, while the second figure denotes how frequently on average the action has been mentioned in one LDS
Source: Riga planning region, 2011; Vidzeme Development Agency, 2007; Kurzeme planning region, 2004; Zemgale planning region, 2008; Latgale planning region, 2010; 40 LAG local development strategies

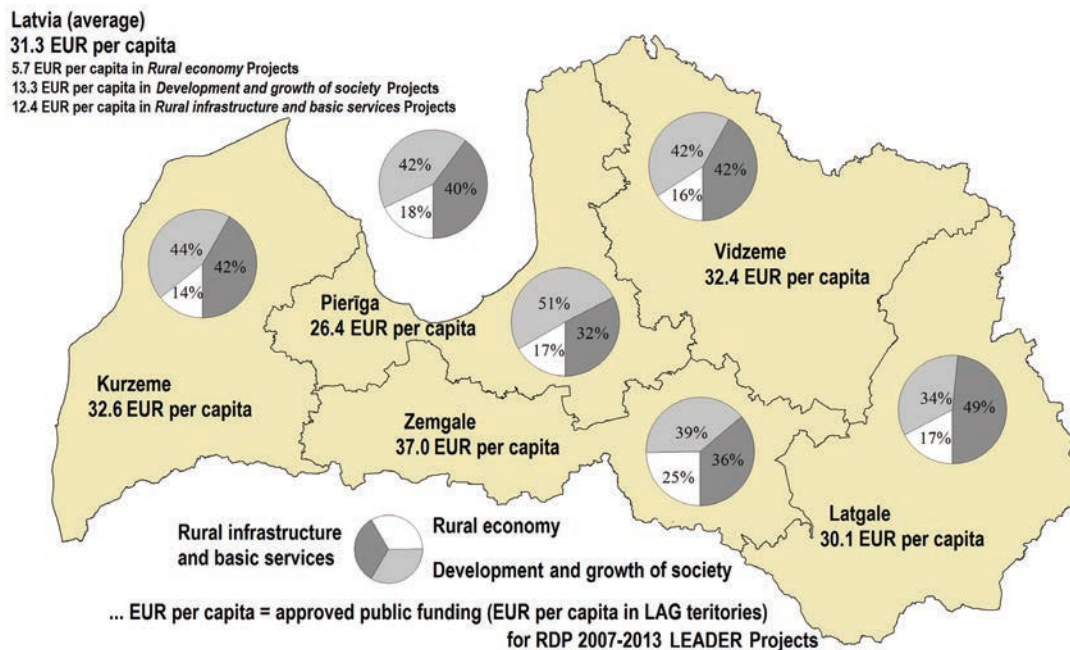


Figure 1. The structure of approved LEADER public financing in the breakdown by thematic groups in the regions of Latvia.

Source: compiled by the authors based on the RDS project database and OCMA.

management, has been mentioned more frequently than in the LDS of other regions, possibly suggesting that this issue is more topical in the Latgale region compared to other regions.

Thematic scope of the LEADER projects

A summary on the projects implemented in Latvia under LEADER approach shows that the largest number of implemented projects, both in terms of quantity and approved public financing, are towards *development and growth of society*. In the regional breakdown, approved financing is rather evenly dispersed, except for project financing prevalence in Pierīga and a notably smaller share for Latgale (see Figure 1). According to the classification developed in the study, the projects directed towards the development of an individual’s mental and physical capacities fall under projects *development and growth of society*, which includes also the development of the necessary infrastructure and facilities. In territorial development planning documents, the development of human resources and knowledge-based development is a target priority on the state, regional and also local level; therefore, the LEADER approach is a contribution towards bringing this priority to life.

In total, for the project group *development and growth of society* public financing in the amount of 12.9 mln EUR has been approved (see Table 2). Most of projects, both in terms of quantity and financing, are directed towards enhancing human capital by widening the possibilities to spend leisure

time meaningfully and productively (investment in activity centres and sports infrastructure and purchase of equipment) - sub-group *development of society*. Some other projects in this sub-group promote hobby activities (hunting, equestrian sports), education/training and information dissemination as well as strengthen capacities of associations and societies. More than 2.5 mln EUR from the approved public financing have been channelled towards support to amateur performance-related projects. National costumes and stage costumes have been purchased (74% of the financing for the sub-group) as well as musical instruments (17%), and premises have been equipped to enable quality amateur performance activities.

Rural infrastructure and basic services is the second important thematic group of LEADER projects, covering projects towards improvement of living standards of population and enhancing the attractiveness of the environment. In the breakdown by region (see Figure 1), the public financing for the approved projects in the group *rural infrastructure and basic services* indicates that in the Latgale region this issue is more topical, while in Pierīga it is comparatively lower. Compared to other thematic groups, these projects are more capital-intensive in terms of public financing investment per project (9.9 EUR). The largest number of projects approved under LEADER RDP 2007-2013 *rural infrastructure and basic services* group are towards enhancement of recreational environment – in the

Table 2

RDP 2007-2013 LEADER project investment and result indicators by main directions

Thematic group/subgroup	Approved projects		Approved total public financing		Average publ.fin. per project, thsd EUR
	number	%	thsd EUR	%	
Development and growth of society	1,577	100	12,942	100	8.2
development of society	1,184	75	10,402	80	8.8
amateur performances	393	25	2,540	20	6.5
Rural infrastructure and basic services	1,225	100	12,102	100	9.9
rural infrastructure	345	28	3,257	27	9.4
healthcare and social services	253	21	2,414	20	9.5
recreational environment	427	35	4,474	37	10.5
cultural and historical heritage	200	16	1,956	16	9.8
Rural economy	801	100	5,464	100	6.8
entrepreneurship	591	74	3,422	63	5.8
social entrepreneurship	27	3	227	4	8.4
support to entrepreneurship	183	23	1,815	33	9.9
Total	3,603		30,508		8.5

Source: compiled by the authors based on the RDS project database.

sub-group *recreational environment* (see Table 2), including more than 140 projects related to setting up playgrounds for children (outside pre-school educational establishments); for this purpose total financing in the country exceeds 1.2 mln EUR (29% of total financing for the sub-group). Other popular projects include establishing of recreation places (29%), places for activities and sports (20%), also projects related to improvement of open-air stages (9%), nature trails (7%) and swimming places (4%). Considering the fact that well-maintained recreational environment as well as investment in preservation of cultural heritage (200 projects have been approved with total financing EUR 1.96 mln) has an important role for development of tourism, a function of indirect promotion of entrepreneurship can be attributed to these projects.

In the sub-group *rural infrastructure* majority of projects (99 or 29%) are related to purchase of sound and light equipment for stages, which is to some extent innovative, because it allows organising cultural events and enjoying them in a new quality. Investments in improvements to community halls and centres is the second most popular in the sub-group *rural infrastructure* (26% of approved projects in terms of quantity and 28% of public financing). Also, investment was made to improve the availability of utility services and transport infrastructure (streets, pavements, bicycle lanes). In *healthcare and social services* sub-group, 2.4 mln EUR of public financing has been approved, including 76% for improvement of social services (social support, care/support/social centres) and 13% for improvement of rehabilitation services and 6% for health care services.

The share of approved *rural economy* projects and public financing is about one fifth of the total number of approved projects and financing in Latvia. These include projects which are directly related to entrepreneurship, development of business infrastructure, availability of consultations and training helpful to businesses. Though promoting economic activities is often not a priority goal of the LEADER approach, it is an important aspect in Latvia, because the availability of jobs and a possibility to earn income is directly related to addressing the population and sustainability problems of rural areas (Krieviņa et al., 2012). Most of *rural economy* projects (73%) cover commercial activities, where investments to develop agricultural production (including forestry, craftsmanship, primary processing, home production) dominate (see Table 2). Other *entrepreneurship* projects pertain to services (recreation (14%), utility (7%), territory improvements (7%) and commercial services (7%).

Considering that the idea of social entrepreneurship in Latvia is a new and topical phenomenon, the projects in the sub-group *social entrepreneurship* should count as innovations. In the social entrepreneurship theme, the issue of the availability of utility, healthcare or social services (in terms of service price and availability) to people from different risk groups has been addressed. Most of public financing has gone to laundries/showers (30% of total financing for the sub-group), healthcare services (25%), babysitting (13%) and preparing firewood (11%). In total, 27 projects were attributed to the sub-group *social entrepreneurship*, with total approved public financing 227 thsd EUR.

The projects in the sub-group *support to entrepreneurship* directly promote business, including

cooperation, business infrastructure, professional development and industry promotion). In 26% of cases (in terms of both number of projects and approved public financing within this sub-group) cooperation of entrepreneurs to reduce production costs can be observed; 35% of the public financing relates to sales promotion (mainly setting up market-places), 33% to development of business infrastructure and 6% to professional training.

The impact of the LEADER approach on addressing regional development and social issues

Some of the LAG self-assessments summarize diverse opinions about the implementation of the LEADER approach and its practical role in the regional development. Thus, according to the survey carried out in 2014 by LAG ‘No Salacas līdz Rūjai’, more than half of local respondents believe that the LEADER projects are very significant and available to all people; the survey carried out by LAG ‘Cēsu rajona lauku partnerība’ more than half (52%) of the respondents partly agree and 19% entirely agree that since 2009 the opportunities to start and diversify business in agriculture, fishery, tourism etc. have improved in the LAG’s area, and also most of the respondents (71%) have noticed that children playgrounds; places for assembly and sport activities have been improved (60%); and the environment has been improved - nature, cultural and other historical objects (65%). Conversely, the interviews with people in the Carnikava municipality carried out in 2012 reveal that people do not associate the terms LEADER, LAG and partnership with the development of their municipality.

In their self-assessment reports about the implementation of LEADER approach, LAGs report the following contributions towards addressing social problems in the countryside:

- people are motivated to be more active in social life, new non-government organisations are being founded, people are more motivated to do volunteer work to the benefit of local community;
- as a result of the LEADER projects, a number of innovations have been introduced, especially as to addressing social problems as well as in respect of organisational solutions, and social exclusion has been reduced;
- opportunities have been created allowing people to develop their skills and lead healthy lifestyles;
- the supported activities have contributed to improving the quality of the infrastructure for leisure, public areas and development of new services. Taken together, this has improved the quality of life.

In order to evaluate the topicality of the implemented LEADER projects and the significance of support, project dead weight has been identified in the breakdown by thematic subgroup. The information has been obtained from the LAG surveys, and it is assumed that the project dead weight is 100% if the project would be implemented at full scope without public financing; 0% if the project would not be implemented without public financing; and 50% if the project would be partly implemented (including over a longer period). Average dead weight has been obtained by weighing the dead weights of individual projects with eligible costs.

The calculation results in the breakdown by the project thematic sub-groups show that the *rural infrastructure* and *entrepreneurship* projects have the highest dead weight - 47 out of one hundred rural infrastructure projects (45 in case of entrepreneurship) would have been implemented also without public financing (see Table 3). The lowest project dead weight is in the projects *support to entrepreneurship, cultural and historical heritage and amateur performances*,

Table 3

Dead weight of implemented RDP 2007-2013 LEADER projects in the breakdown by thematic group in surveyed LAGs

Thematic group/subgroup	Dead weight, % (100%=pure dead weight)
Entrepreneurship	45
Support to entrepreneurship	22
Development of society	33
Amateur performances	29
Rural infrastructure	47
Healthcare and social services	41
Recreational environment	32
Cultural and historical heritage	27
Total	36

*social entrepreneurship included in the entrepreneurship group

Source: calculations based on the LAG survey data (cover 44% of public financing).

22%, 27% and 29% respectively. Consequently, these projects are unlikely to be implemented without public financing. Project dead weight, apart from allowing to make judgements about the role of support, also suggest the innovation level in the projects. Since innovative projects have a higher failure risk, a low dead weight of the project (i.e., the project would not get implemented without public financing) suggests a higher innovation level (Ekosgen, 2011). In case of Latvia, a higher project dead weight might also indicate that the project is related to addressing the basic needs of people and businesses.

The authors also performed a correlation analysis in order to find out the correlation between the analysed LEADER project public financing per capita impacts on the dynamics of the number of population. Given the existing depopulation tendencies in the country as well as in an attempt to ignore the varied development levels across the areas, for the purpose of the study an index of the change in the number of population, which describes the dynamics of the number of population between 2009 and 2013 compared to that between 2004 and 2008 was introduced. The calculation shows a weak link ($r=0.424$, $p=0.01$) between LEADER project public financing and changes in the population in the countryside.

Conclusions

1. The place and role of the LDS developed by LAGs has not been formally defined by the regional or local territorial development documents, though, at the level of targeted priorities and activities, LDS are coherent with the main emphasis of the regional level development.
2. In practice, the implementation of the LDS in the framework of LEADER RDP 2007-2013 is not balanced: at the planning level, priorities and activities of LDS widely cover entrepreneurship development, though among the implemented projects economy related projects account for only about 18% of the total approved financing. Most of LEADER projects have been implemented to facilitate the development of infrastructure related to active recreation and quality leisure time as well as culture and sports.
3. The implementation of the LEADER RDP 2007-2013 projects attributed to the thematic group *development and growth of society* has facilitated to the widening of the possibilities to spend leisure time productively, contributed to the improvement of the quality of educational services as well as skills related to local administration and cooperation. Only 1/3 of these projects would have been implemented without public support.
4. Project group *rural infrastructure and basic services* has mainly contributed to the improvement of the availability and quality of public infrastructure and services (mainly healthcare and social services). This group is characterized by comparatively high project deadweight indicating on high necessity of these projects as well as low innovation level (the basic needs of rural population are being addressed).
5. In relation to *rural economy* mainly commercial projects regarding agricultural and home production, recreational and utility services have been implemented, including some social entrepreneurship projects. Almost half of them would be implemented also without public support, suggesting a high need for these projects.
6. According to surveys conducted by LAGs in 2013 and 2014, inhabitants have noticed and positively evaluate changes taking place in their local territory introduced by the implementation of the LEADER approach.
7. Self-assessment reports of LAGs also highlight qualitative gains from the implementation of LDS: enhanced cooperation, active participation in addressing local issues, possibility to develop new skills and to lead a healthy lifestyle, to develop local cultural heritage and natural values. This evaluation is coherent with the opinions expressed about the LEADER approach in other countries – it values the role of social capital and focuses on the enhancement and use of its potential at the local level.
8. In order to enhance the role of LAGs and LDS in addressing regional development and social problems at local level, it is advisable that the potential interaction of the activities provided by all regional development documents is observed when determining priorities at regional level; while implementation of the LDS should pay more attention to long-term effects and even accomplishment of target priorities.

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