

## ANALYSIS OF ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF LEADER PROJECTS IN LATVIA

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**Abstract.** Facilitation of economic activity is often not the main objective of the LEADER approach, at the same time, business development is a very important prerequisite for the viability of Latvian rural area as it faces general depopulation trend. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to assess the role of the LEADER approach implementation to employment and income generation in Latvian rural area. The paper examines the role and thematic scope of the LEADER approach implementation, analyses the results of LEADER projects related to rural economy, and evaluates economic impact of LEADER projects in terms of maintained and created jobs as well as investment-generated and employment-generated income. The authors use complex methodological approach and apply both quantitative and qualitative methods. The analysis of the economic aspects shows that LEADER projects have impact on the development of economic activity, and to enhance the impact, implementation of business related projects could be stimulated, as they contribute to job maintenance and creation the most. Also, the acquisition of goods and services of local origin in LEADER projects could be stimulated as they generate income in the local economy through demand.

**Key words:** LEADER, local action groups, employment, income generation.

**JEL code:** O150, O180

### Introduction

LEADER has been used as a tool and an innovative approach to solve the European Union rural development problems by initiating the development and its implementation at local rural community level since 1991. LEADER is aimed at improving the quality of life in the rural area, considering economic and social improvements as well as environment preservation. The LEADER approach covers all aspects of welfare, and unlike other public funding activities it seeks solutions close to the local area. Consequently, it is expected that these solutions will be innovative, original and suited to a particular situation.

Most of Latvian rural area faces depopulation problem. According to the CSB of Latvia, since 2007 only in few municipalities (13 out of 110) of Pierīga region the population has been

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increasing; in other municipalities population has decreased – even by 19% over seven years. Job availability and the possibility to earn an income close to the place of residence is one of the most important prerequisites for the territory viability (LSIAE et al., 2012; Krievina et al., 2012). Therefore, it is a challenge to develop the rural area as an attractive living and working space, by using all local resources and potential for the growth, including the LEADER approach.

The objective of this paper is to assess the role of the implementation of the LEADER approach to employment and income generation in Latvian rural area. To achieve the objective, the following tasks have been set: 1) to analyse the role of the LEADER approach and the thematic scope of implemented LEADER projects; 2) to assess the results of the implemented LEADER projects related to rural economy, including social entrepreneurship; and 3) to evaluate the impact of the LEADER approach on the maintenance and creation of jobs as well as income generation, both from investments and employment.

The study analyses LEADER projects implemented within the Latvian Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 (hereinafter - RDP 2007-2013) under Measure 4.1.1. "Improving Competitiveness of Local Development Strategies in the Territory" (data on 387 projects from the Rural Support Service (hereinafter - RSS) database 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 from the RSS database obtained on January 30, 2014). Overall, the study covers 3603 projects, the implementation of which attracted EUR 30.5 million of public funding.

Previous studies of the LEADER approach, its results and impact in different EU Member States are generally based on qualitative analysis, using data obtained from questionnaires or interviews (Schiller, 2009; Exodea Consulting, 2013, the ENRD, 2013). These studies provide insight into the quality aspects of the LEADER approach and share the opinion that it is often rather difficult to evaluate the LEADER results because of implementation of the so-called soft projects with immaterial results (ENRD, 2013).

The economic results of the LEADER approach have not been analyzed in Latvia. Therefore, this study is innovative; by using complex methodological approach, considering limitations of the available data as well as on the basis of assumptions that allow this information to generalize, the authors provide the evaluation of the economic aspects of the LEADER projects, focusing on the employment development and income generation opportunities in Latvian rural area.

A broad study of the economic effectiveness of the LEADER approach, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, has been carried out in the UK in 2011 (Ekosgen, 2011). The authors of this paper have adapted part of Ekosgen methods to the local conditions and availability of the information.

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 for this paper. The main sources of data for the study are the RSS data, local action group (hereinafter - LAG) survey (evaluation of maintained and created jobs, the probability of project implementation without the support - dead-weight; the survey covers information about 38% of projects and 44% of the acquired RDP 2007 -2013 LEADER public funding), the CSB of Latvia, the SRS 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 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 to determine the thematic focus of the LEADER projects in Latvia. Classification system was established, 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).

Data used in the economic evaluation have been obtained from the LAG survey, hence, there are objective constraints in their use due to subjective interpretation of survey questions, when assessing the impact of implemented projects on the local level. However, as the survey respondents are local experts, it is the best expert evaluation of the projects that was available.

## **Research results and discussion**

### **1. Role and thematic scope of LEADER approach implementation**

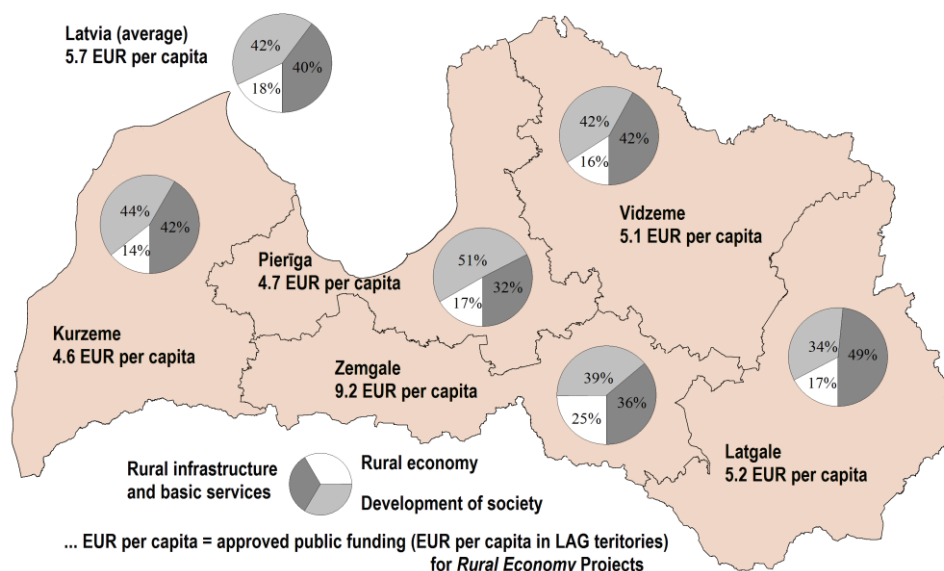
In the previous studies, many researchers welcome the LEADER approach as a tool to deal with rural development challenges, however, the conclusions about its practical implications and the role tend to be contradictory. Considering that the LEADER approach has been implemented for more than 20 years, its territorial expansion and financial capacity has consistently increased, it can be concluded that in general the EU rural development policy-makers are convinced of the positive impact the LEADER approach has on rural development.

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, Lastra-Bravo, 2010) and contributing to the learning of new skills, exchange of experience and improvement in cooperation as well as reducing the indifference (Bruckmeier, 2000; ÖIR, 2004; Wellbrock et al., 2013). With regard to the entrepreneurship, the role of the LEADER approach for the development of new generation rural enterprises has been emphasized by some authors. At a time when agriculture is losing its dominance in income generation and employment in rural areas, it is particularly important to establish companies, which are closely connected with the local area, for their existing resources and development potential, found in the history, culture and nature, and which are multi-sectoral, dynamic, and innovative, and have collaborative networks (van der Ploeg, 2006). Whereas there are authors increasingly mentioning the social network as

important factor fostering innovation and entrepreneurship (Grimaldi et al., 2011; Leyden et al., 2013). The LEADER approach contributes to the endogenous development of the territory based on local resources and the bottom-up approach to the development planning (Kis et al., 2012), promotes collaboration and cooperation between entrepreneurs. Expansion and diversification create additional jobs as well as the multiplier of these activities at the regional level is higher than the one of classical, specialized farming (Heiman et al., 2002).

The LEADER approach is based on the local development strategies, implemented by the LAG, intended to solve the local problems and to determine priorities for local development of the area. Some researchers emphasize the role of LAGs by naming them a spatial organizing force and the institution which on the local level implements and coordinates the rural development process (Kis et al., 2012; Falkowski, 2013). However, the European Court of Auditors in its 2010 report No 5 for the LEADER approach in rural areas devotes some criticism towards LAG activities. With regard to the implementation of the projects, the main criticism is devoted to the deficiencies in the project content – in practice only a small number of projects demonstrate innovation and interaction; in most cases they are only slightly different from other public funding activities or traditional municipality functions. It is also observed that quite often LEADER projects simply address the individual needs of beneficiaries, rather than contribute to the increase of welfare in general (European Court of Auditors, 2010).

The thematic analysis of the RDP 2007-2013 LEADER projects implemented in Latvia shows that in terms both the number and the approved public funding most projects can be attributed to the group - development of society. According to the classification developed in the study, these are the projects that focus on the development of mental and physical capabilities of humans, including the necessary infrastructure and equipment. The second most important thematic group is rural infrastructure and basic services, i.e. the projects that focus on convenience, environmental appeal and improvement of living conditions of local residents. The share of rural economy-related project in Latvia on average is about a fifth of the total approved projects and the amount of funding (Figure 1).



Source: authors' construction based on RSS and OCMA data

Fig. 1. **Public funding structure of approved LEADER projects (RDP 2007-2013) by thematic groups in Latvian regions**

In the regional context, the smallest share of the rural economy group projects in the total approved public funding can be observed in Kurzeme region (Figure 1), while Zemgale region has the highest proportion as well as there is also a high level of public funding per inhabitant in Zemgale region, on average of almost two times the rate of other regions.

## 2. Analysis of rural economy projects

Facilitation of economic activity is only one of the objectives of the LEADER approach, and it is often not the main objective, though, in Latvia, particularly in rural area, where there is general depopulation trend, the business development is very important aspect.

In total, 801 projects of the RDP 2007-2013 LEADER approach could be attributed to the rural economy thematic group - projects directly related to the business, development of entrepreneurial infrastructure, availability of business consulting and training. For reaching the goal of economic activity facilitation in LAG areas, in Latvia EUR 5.7 on average are approved as public funding per capita (LAG areas). Compared to projects in other groups, projects in rural economic group were financially less intensive, which may be explained by the support rate ceiling which for commercial projects is significantly lower than for public benefit projects.

In the group of rural economy, the majority (74%) are commercial projects (Table 1), covering all projects applied by entrepreneurs, farms or the self-employed. Projects of societies and unions are included in this group if the service or the product is intended to be sold on the market (rather than as a service to members).

Table 1

**Results of projects in the group of rural economy by key thematic areas in Latvia**

<b>Thematic area</b>	<b>Approved projects</b>		<b>Approved public funding,</b>		<b>Public funding per project, thsd.EUR</b>
	<b>number</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>thsd. EUR</b>	<b>%</b>	
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
<b>Total</b>	801	100	5 464	100	6.8

*Source: authors' compilation based on RSS and OCMA data*

In the group of rural economy, projects covering support to entrepreneurship (projects that contribute directly to business, including cooperation, development of entrepreneurial infrastructure, professional development and industry/product promotional projects) financially are more ample. For the support to entrepreneurship, the average approved public financing per project was EUR 9.9 thousand, while the support to entrepreneurship projects comprised EUR 5.8 thousand. It should be noted that 26% of the projects supporting entrepreneurship (also covering 26% of public funds) can be determined as entrepreneurial cooperation projects in the field of production cost reduction. In addition, 35% of public funding are related to sales promotion (mainly in the area of market creation), 33% - business infrastructure, and 6% - vocational training.

Lack of diversity of rural economy projects has been observed in Latvia by analysing the content (objectives) of these projects by thematic area. For example, commercial projects are dominated by investment projects related to agricultural production development (including forestry, crafts, primary processing, home production) (409 projects, which is 69% of all entrepreneurship projects, covering 65% of the approved public funding in this thematic area). Projects related to the development of agricultural production are essentially the only commercial projects related to the production; the other projects (recreation, consumer services, territory improvement services etc.) are approved in the service field.

According to the project objectives, 27 LEADER projects were attributed to the group of social entrepreneurship, with EUR 227 thousand of public financing approved for their implementation. The implemented social entrepreneurship projects are mainly related to a variety of consumer, health or social services, emphasizing their availability (in terms of prices and service location) for people from different social risk groups. Most public funding refers to laundry/showers (30%), health services (25%), babysitting (13%), and wood preparation services (11%). Despite the projects mostly are not original, social entrepreneurship projects can be considered as innovation in Latvia, because the idea of social entrepreneurship is rather new but topical. Internationally, social entrepreneurship is considered to be a vital part of the country's economy, and an effective way to create and manage human capital with the recognition of the importance of personal and community interests (Defourny, Nyssens, 2010;

Moskvina, 2013). In Latvia, the role of social entrepreneurship is underestimated so far but can contribute to job creation in the coming years (Dobele L., Dobele A., 2014).

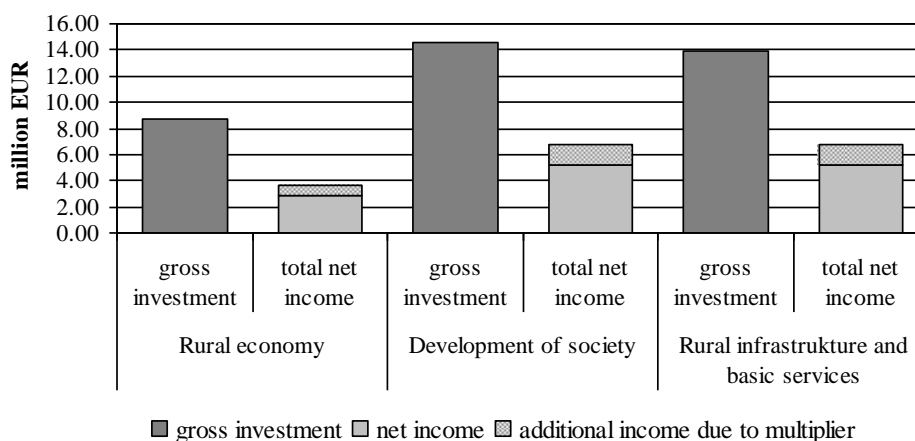
### **3. Evaluation of economic impact of LEADER projects**

#### ***- Investment and the income generated***

By purchasing goods and services (through investment) within the public co-financed projects, income is generated for the owners of production factors used in the production of the goods or service bought that in turn through demand of other goods and services is basis for further income generation.

Total eligible costs representing acquisitions of goods and services of all analysed LEADER projects (gross investment) by adjusting the project specific dead-weight (obtained from surveys of the LAGs), the share of local origin goods and services and respecting the multiplier, the total net income of local producers and service providers is obtained, including extra income due to the multiplier effect. To evaluate the income, income multiplier 1.3 is used, calculated according to the methodology used in the RDP 2007-2013 mid-term evaluation (Auzina, 2010). Import and local investment ratio is derived from the analysis of the procurement documentation of LEADER projects through random sample survey in different regional RSS units, covering all thematic project groups.

The evaluation shows that the implementation of the LEADER projects has impact on the business development, i.e. the projects create demand for local goods and services (some projects during implementation provided also jobs), generating income for local producers of approximately EUR 13.3 million. Respecting multipliers, this income creates additional income to the local economy of approximately EUR 4 million. The particular importance of the implementation of the LEADER approach has been in generating the demand for local handicraft masters, furniture manufacturers and playground element producers. Particularly noteworthy are the national costumes and their elements, the producers of which with the help of LEADER projects were able to earn about EUR 1.5 million that otherwise would not be possible (dead-weight for these projects is 27%).



**Source: authors' calculations based on RSS data (including project procurement information), LAG survey, and CSB of Latvia data**

**Fig. 2. LEADER project investments and the investment-generated income by the main thematic groups in Latvia**

Figure 2 depicts the investments of LEADER project and the net income generated to the local producers by them (respecting also multiplier), broken down by project thematic groups. Investments made in LEADER projects related to the development of society presents the greatest overall potential for income generation, though the investments in these projects were larger than in projects of other thematic groups, especially rural economy. The income generation potential of rural economic project is the smallest, both due to the relatively small total amount of investments made, and because most of these projects have acquired technological equipment necessary for modernization what is not produced in Latvia, and thus, these projects participate less in demand for locally originated goods and services.

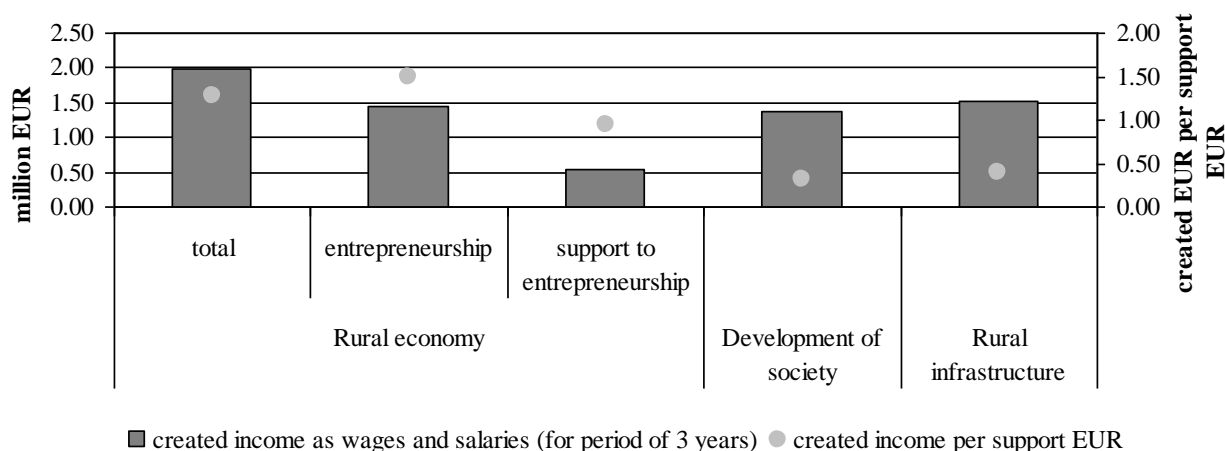
#### **- Maintained and created jobs and income generated**

Evaluation of maintained and newly created jobs in full-time equivalent (due to the implementation of LEADER projects) for the needs of this study is derived from the LAG survey. This information is used both as a direct impact on business activity indicator as well as to evaluate the potential impact of the maintained and created jobs on local economy in the form of income (such as wages and salaries), and to determine the ratio of incomes created by maintained and new jobs (FTEs) to the public funds. It is assumed that after the implementation of the project the new or maintained jobs are paid for and exist at least three years (Ekosgen, 2011), and thus, generate income - wages and salaries over the next three years (but jobs existing during the implementation of project correspond to the actual period of employment).

According to the evaluation, due to the public funding allocated to the implementation of the LEADER 2007-2013 projects, the following net (considering project dead-weight) results could be achieved in the surveyed LAGs in relation to employment and income generation potential:

- during project implementation, 39.9 (FTE) jobs ensured;
- as a project result, 81.6 direct and 121.5 indirect jobs maintained (FTE);
- as a project result, 101.4 direct and 102.4 indirect jobs created (FTE);

- as the result of maintained and created jobs, in the next three years the expected income as wages and salaries could be EUR 4.9 million;
- EUR 1 of public funding invested could bring a return in the form of wage and salaries (for period of 3 years) of EUR 0.49 respectively.



\* Social entrepreneurship included under entrepreneurship  
 Source: authors' calculations based on LAG survey and SRS data

Fig. 3. **Employment-generated income and support return in the implemented projects of surveyed LAGs by thematic groups**

According to the projects implemented by the surveyed LAGs, projects relating to the development of society had the greatest impact on indirect job maintenance and creation (22% of the number of jobs), while the entrepreneurship Leader projects had the greatest impact on direct job safeguarding and creation (40%). Overall entrepreneurship projects contributed to the facilitation of the employment the most (29% of the total number of maintained and created jobs), and thus, also to the possible formation of incomes (in the form of wages and salaries), and consequently, the highest potential return of EUR 1 invested has been observed in this thematic group (Figure 3).

Attributing the LAG survey data to all LEADER approach projects implemented in Latvia (all public funding), the authors obtained the net results of total invested public funding to the local economy, which is achieved by facilitating employment and potential income generation:

- 0.7 thousand jobs maintained and 0.7 thousand - created in FTE (including 300 new direct jobs);
- possible income as wages and salaries – EUR 15.6 million (within 3 years);
- the expected income generated from the maintained and created jobs (as wages and salaries for the period of 3 years) offsets approximately half of the invested public funding (one euro invested could generate income EUR 0.51 as wages and salaries over three years).

## Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

1. The approved projects and public funding structure show that the most important benefits of the implementation of the LEADER approach in Latvia are linked to the

development of society, followed by improvements in the rural infrastructure and basic services. Projects related to business development (group of rural economy) make up about a fifth of the total approved RDP 2007-2013 LEADER projects and public funding.

2. Most of the rural economy projects are directly related to business development but there is lack of diversity in project objectives (mainly agricultural production, home produced goods, crafts, rarely - recreational and consumer services) as well as commercial projects have high dead-weight. At the same time, some projects were implemented in the field of social entrepreneurship what can be considered innovation at Latvia level.

3. Investments in the approved LEADER projects created demand for domestic goods and services, generating income for the local producers around EUR 17.3 million. Although the estimated investment-generated income effect is not large, the implementation of the LEADER approach has been particularly significant in creating demand for local handicraft masters, furniture manufacturers and playground element producers. By contrast, in the rural economy projects, almost two-thirds of the investment was associated with foreign origin, as the technical equipment is often not manufactured in Latvia.

4. Evaluation shows that the income generated by the maintained and newly created jobs (due to the implementation of the LEADER projects) could offset at least half of the amount of public funds spent on LEADER projects. In general, entrepreneurship projects have the greatest impact on employment development and hence the potential employment-generated income. The greatest impact on direct job retention and creation has been due to entrepreneurship projects, and on indirect jobs - due to the development of society projects.

5. The analysis of the economic aspects shows that the LEADER projects have impact on the development of economic activity; to enhance the economic impact, implementation of business related projects could be stimulated, as they contribute to job maintenance and creation the most. In other LEADER projects, the acquisition of goods and services of local origin could be stimulated which generates income in the local economy through demand.

## **Acknowledgements**

The paper was supported by the National Research Program 5.2.1. SUSTINNO.

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