



Towards Sustainable Rural Development: The LEADER+ Approach in the Czech Republic

Introduction

Rural development policy is an increasingly important component of the common agricultural policy (CAP). It promotes sustainable development in Europe's rural areas addressing economic, social and environmental concerns. Over 50 % of the European Union's (EU) population (EU-27) lives in rural areas, which cover 90 % of the EU's territory. Leader represents an innovative approach within EU rural development policy.

What is the Leader approach to rural development?

Leader+ is one of the four initiatives financed by structural funds of the EU and is designed to help rural actors consider the long-term potential of their local region. As an integral part of Rural Development Programmes in the EU Member States, the Leader+ approach is supported under Council Regulation (EC) 1698/2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). LEADER originally stands for "Liaison Entre les Actions de Development Rural", the English translation meaning "Links between actions of rural development". As the name suggests, it represents a method of mobilizing and delivering rural development in local communities, rather than a fixed set of measures to be implemented.

Presenting the seven key features of the Leader approach

As defined by the **European Commission**, the Leader approach can be characterized by **seven key features**. Every feature complements and interacts positively with the others, throughout the whole implementation process, with lasting effects on the dynamics of rural areas and their capacity to solve their own problems.

1. **Area-based local development strategies** – A **local approach** takes a small and socially cohesive territory, often characterized by common tradition, a local identity and a sense of belonging or common needs and expectations, as the target area for policy implementation. This approach facilitates the recognition of local strengths and weaknesses, threats and opportunities or endogenous potential for rural development.
2. **Bottom-up approach** – the most distinctive feature. It means that **local actors participate in decision-making** about the strategy and in the selection of the priorities to be pursued in their local area.
3. **Establishing Local Action Groups (LAGs)** – Setting up a local partnership, known as a "local action group" (LAG), is an original and important feature. The LAG is responsible for identifying and implementing a local development strategy, making decisions about the allocation of its financial resources and managing them. A LAG should enrol **public, as well as private partners** (50% to 50%); be well balanced and representative of the existing local interest groups. The rural actors that are most active in local initiatives: professional organizations and unions (farmers, non-farming professionals and micro-enterprises); trade associations; citizens, residents and their local organizations; local political representatives; environmental associations; cultural and community service providers, including the media; women's associations and young people.
4. **Innovation facilitation** – It may mean the introduction of a **new product**, a **new process**, a **new organization** or a **new market**. Innovation in rural areas may imply the transfer and adaptation of innovations developed elsewhere, the modernization of traditional forms of know-how, or finding new solutions of persistent rural problems.
5. **Integration and multi-sectoral actions** - The local development strategy must be **multi-sectoral**, integrating several sectors of activity. The actions and projects should be **linked and coordinated** as a coherent whole.
6. **Networking** – **Exchanging achievements, experiences and know-how** between Leader groups, rural areas, administrations and organizations involved in rural development (within the EU), whether or not they are direct Leader beneficiaries. It represents a means of transferring good practice, of disseminating innovation and of building on the lessons learned from local rural development.
7. **Cooperation** – Cooperation goes further than networking. It involves a LAG undertaking a **joint project with another Leader group, or with a group taking a similar approach, in another region, Member State, or even a third country**. Such cooperation can help Leader groups to boost their local activities. It can allow them to resolve certain problems or add value to local resources.

Implementing Leader – the six basic steps in implementing Leader

Putting the above mentioned principles into practice means real people designing local strategies and participating in activities. When implementing the Leader approach for the first time, the following steps, as recommended by the European Commission would be taken in an ideal situation:

1. ***Capacity building*** – For the Leader approach to work well, it is necessary that local actors have or acquire the required capabilities regarding project ideas and know-how, human resources to devote to particular activities. Using networking and other communication tools is of great assistance in creating such capacity. Capacity building is a collective activity.

There are **six basic types of capacity** necessary not only for implementing local development strategies through the Leader approach but also for acquiring necessary skills and animating an area on behalf of future Leader projects – financial, human, information and communication, organisational, tangible and facilities and political capacities.

2. ***Bringing together local actors*** – this basically means organizing public meetings, seminars or workshops, media communication or fairs and exhibitions within the local area to bring together the key interested players, to help emerge ideas and to allow local actors to discuss the needs of their area.
3. ***Territory analysis*** – It is necessary to work up a detailed analysis of the local rural area concerned. This basically means identifying the area's assets (people, activities, landscapes, heritage, know-how) regarding the unique features that can be developed. It is important that "visions" from different points of view of the future and of the best strategy for the area have a chance to be publicly discussed. A high degree of consensus should be achieved.
4. ***Identifying existing activities/initiatives*** – Establishing what initiatives already exist is fundamental to deciding whether to build on them or replace them.
5. ***Creation of a partnership*** – Bringing together local actors and the territorial analysis facilitates the identification of those that need to be included in the public-private partnership and manage the implementation. Eventually, this leads to the establishment of a **local action group (LAG)**. The LAG is the partnership which effectively implements the local development approach agreed within the community.
6. ***Preparation of a local development strategy*** – The local development approach is formalised in a **local development strategy** document. This includes establishment of the objectives, definition of strategic priorities and ranking of the actions to be undertaken. This local development strategy will be the basis of the LAG's application for support under open calls for proposals organised by the Member States/regions for Leader. Member States or regions themselves select successful LAGs and allocate budgets to them for implementation of their local strategies.

Highlighting national and transnational cooperation

National and transnational cooperation is especially based on personal contact with potential partners and include the participation in conferences and workshops, study stays and visits as well as the participation on projects and the search for new ideas for cooperation.

Projects of cooperation include a „soft“ part – know-how and experience exchange, ideas sharing, common actions (promotion, web-sites, etc) and an investment part (individual activities of project partners).

Transnational cooperation project objectives include, for example, the following:

- Exchanging ideas and best practices on how to engage and sustain local community participation in the development of cultural and heritage projects.
- Developing stronger identities and images through the involvement and knowledge of local people in identifying the history, heritage, folk and craft traditions of their ideas.
- Identifying methods of joint development and promotion to support local communities who wish to utilize their heritage, culture and landscape.
- Encouraging organisers of festivals and events to utilize local heritage and cultural resources within their activities to solidify the distinctiveness of the local area.
- Developing ways to engage local business with their local communities so that tourism potential can be maximised to the benefit of businesses.
- Producing methodology of how to organize successful festival and event.
- Setting up network of local festivals and event organizers.

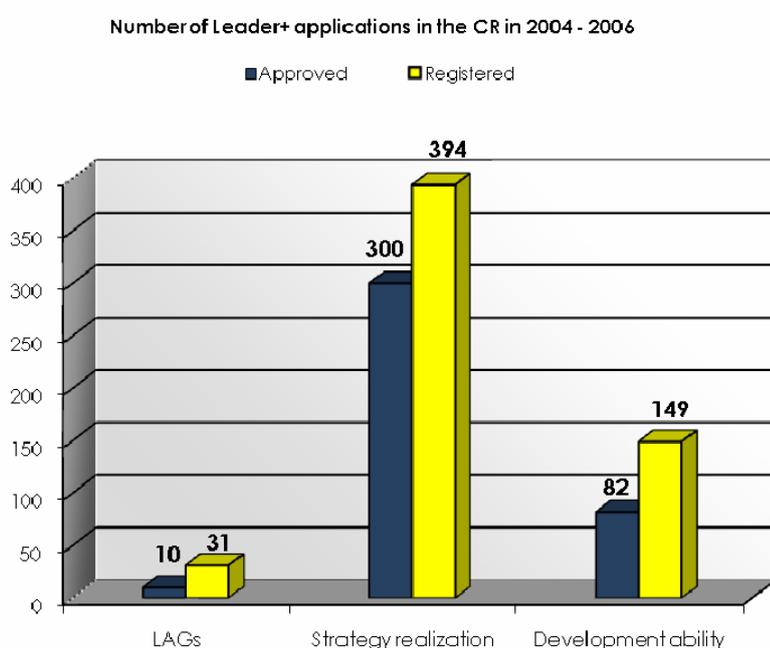
Transnational cooperation is a long lasting process – do not expect immediate profit.

Specifics of the Czech national situation and brief history of the Leader approach in the CR

The Czech Republic has its own specifics, provided by its historical development, settlement structure, population density and by the nature of the local economy. The socio-economic structure of the Czech rural population also has its own significant specifics, marked by post-war socio-political changes and population resettlement and ageing of the rural population, decline in large-scale agricultural production, transformation of the suburban countryside and in the recent past the widening of differences between rural and urban areas.

In the Czech Republic, the origin of the idea analogous to the Leader approach has its roots in the year 1998, when the Czech National Rural Renewal Programme supported the development of rural micro-regions. In the last years, the approach to rural development on the basis of the Leader method was promoted by means of the **SAPARD pre-accession programme** (2000-2004: 10 micro-regions, 210 local development strategies) and the sub-measure LEADER+ in the **Operational Programme of Rural Development and Multifunctional Agriculture** (2004-2006: **82 partnerships skills acquisition; 10 LAGs implementation of local strategy, 300 strategy realizations; 2006: 36 LAGs**). (During the period of 2004 – 2007, concurrently with the EU Leader+, the Czech National Leader Programme also was realized: 34 LAGs implementation of local strategy).

Summary of LEADER+ in the Czech Republic in the finalized period 2004 - 2006



During the period 2004-2006, applications under the Leader+ sub-measure were submitted under the following titles and sub-titles:

- Strategy realization:
LAGs (32 % approved)
- Strategy realization:
Project realization (76 % approved)
- Development ability:
Fulfilling Leader principle (55 % approved)

Objectives of Leader projects in the CR

The Leader+ initiative particularly supports diversification of activities in rural areas, with emphasis on non-farm activities, and increasing the quality of life which present the key prerequisites to successful rural development. The most frequent objectives of Leader+ projects realized in the CR have been oriented towards the following activities of interest: *reconstruction of historical architecture, developing information infrastructure, museum establishment and reconstruction of information centres, installations of new technologies, improvement of waste management, technological equipment of municipalities (e.g. communication system, presentation technology, community development innovation technology), project documentation processing, concourse revitalization, organization of meetings and gatherings of groups and people, children's free time, leisure activities especially for women on maternity leave and seniors, folkloric culture activities, competitions for the local, development of tourist services and development of nature trails.*

Examples of successful projects realized during the implementation period of 2004 – 2006

- Posázaví LAG*: Increasing the quality of awareness and know-how, creating a web portal linking other subjects in the region which will enable training in the field of information and communication technologies. Training shall be especially aimed at young people, women on maternity leave and socially underprivileged families. The project also aims to create a central information database at the municipal office.
- Region Haná LAG*: The creation of bicycle paths and bicycle rest places, especially in the Olomouc city environs, has increased the attractiveness of the region for visiting cyclists, supporting sustainable forms of tourism.

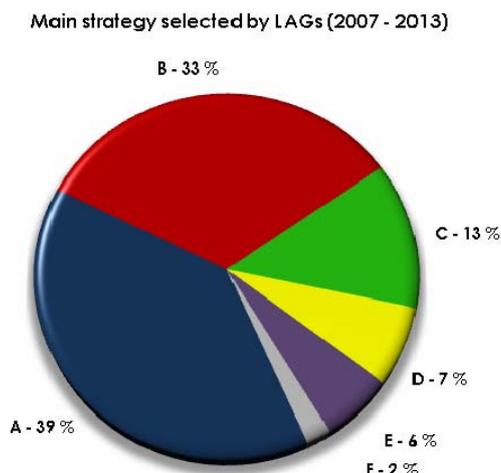
- *Rýmařovsko MAS*: Three **cross-country ski paths** have been developed along with marked improvement of their **maintenance** even under severe weather conditions. Pathways even to areas previously inaccessible have been opened. Such a project presents **new tourist services**, free-time opportunities for the local population, as well as support in the **competitive strength and economic situation of the region**.
- *Sdružení Růžže LAG*: The adaptation of unused local monastery premises in the Nové Hradky village for a suitable space with non-barrier access – **establishing a ceramic shop and pottery**. A regular ceramic hobby group has been launched, which is mainly aimed at **quality free time for children and seniors**.
- *Podrálsko LAG*: The realization of **ten outdoor and tourist happenings for children as well as adults** enabled close familiarization with the region. Such an activity shall improve and strengthen the relation of the local people to their home region.
- *Kyjovské Slovácko in Motion LAG*: The creation of a **fund for folk costumes aimed at the preservation of local customs and traditions**. The numbers of local seamstresses and embroidery experts have increased significantly. The project also includes public presentations and work-shops which mainly address young people in order to raise their interest in local events.
- *Český Západ – Local partnership*: The construction of a **pathway to school** in the village of Záchlumí has provided for safety of children and youth, as well as to all visitors. The concourse of the school has been developed into an “**ecological school garden**”. The project also includes the implementation of **new training programmes** with the cooperation of local producers.

LEADER+ in the Czech Republic in 2007 – 2013 – Axis IV of the Rural Development Programme

On the basis of preliminary results of the first open call for application for 2007 – 2013 and interviews with 105 respondents from LAG members, we have been able to determine which main topic will be preferred for future development of LAGs’ strategies during the period of 2007 – 2013.

The following strategies were found to have been selected:

- Quality of life improvement in rural areas including material and nonmaterial services (39 %).**
- Preservation and friendly use of natural and cultural values of rural areas including NATURA 2000 localities (33 %).**
- Environment & landscape improvement (13 %).**
- Support of local economy in rural areas including services for inhabitants and visitors, utilization of new technologies and common market of local products and services (7 %).**
- Improvement of agricultural & forest competitiveness (6 %).**
- LAGs are not sure yet (2 %).**



In total, 156 LAGs and micro-regions have been established so far in the CR (the situation as of March 2008) - most often as a civil associations and non-profit organizations. **Leader+ administrative criteria were fulfilled by 99 out of the 102 LAGs which applied for the period 2007 – 2013 (i.e. 97 %; the ability to fulfill Leader principle has therefore strengthened significantly compared to the previous period)**. In the first round of selection (April 2008), 57 LAGs have applied for subsidy, out of which 24 were selected. For the years 2007 – 2013, the total number of approved applicants (projects) is so far 143, since one LAG may apply for a total of two to five projects.

In the period 2007 - 2013, support for strategy realization will be provided to a total of approximately 70 LAGs through 2 rounds of selection, therefore not even 50 % of all LAGs applied will be granted a subsidy. However, all LAGs (not only the 70 selected for Leader+ financial support) can participate as partners in projects of international cooperation.

At the present, 15 % of national territory is covered by LAGs. The goal is to cover at least 50 % of the territory. This depends on the mechanism of selection and also on the average size of LAGs, which is expected to increase.

One of the improvements for the period of 2007 – 2013 compared to the past period of the Leader implementation is that the program has opened also for local agricultural enterprises. This will be a great advantage for the support and promotion especially of organic products and regional and traditional specialties.

The Czech National Rural Observatory for the Leader initiative

Established in 2005, the **Observatory aims to** support LAGs and other rural actors and their networks by training, consultancy, research and information services, provide services for the National Network of LAGs, inform the public, media and public administration about rural issues and Leader principles, cooperate with public authorities at the national, regional and local levels in addressing rural problems and needs, influence rules and conditions for funding LAGs from EAFRD and Participate in activities of relevant international organizations and networks.

Members of the Czech National Rural Observatory and have started a **systematic training of members, officials, managers and other LAG people**. As a part of these projects, a **wide survey** with self-evaluation of LAG capacity is carried out. This is an entry point for an innovative **benchmarking of LAGs** at international level – an anonymous comparison of current situation and internal conditions of LAGs in various EU countries.

Lessons learned on the basis of Czech experience with Leader implementation

- It is crucial to enroll local people in the process and to highlight the importance of **animation activities**.
- **Self governance** is a key feature.
- Strategies should be worked out through a **community method of planning**. Leader does not only mean repairing fences; it stands for **community building** and **strengthening democracy on the local level**.
- It is easier to learn the Leader method through **cooperation** projects than from reading instructions. Partnership projects are especially important for New Member States that are at the beginning, so that they can learn the Leader method quickly using the experience of Old Member States. Do not try to invent the already invented!
- The national rural development network should include both, **formal and informal networks**.
- For the constructive development of LAGs mutual support is needed, by means of public **awareness**, both passive (internet – creation of LAG websites: e.g. www.posazavi.com, www.regionhana.cz, www.regionpoodri.cz, www.leader-ceskyzapad.cz) as well as active (seminars, workshops, meetings of working groups, joint social events). The website www.leaderplus.cz (including an English version) has been created as a very promising Czech national portal for rural issues in the country.
- It is important to create a complex system of **systematic education of LAG members** in management and administration, project selection, work with public, project monitoring, etc.
- A well developed LAG works like successful small and medium companies.
- In the CR, the optimal size of a LAG's territory has proven to cover approximately 30 – 40 thousand people.
- When evaluating LAGs, the ability of **community building, manager capabilities** and the **knowledge and understanding of the particular area** should mainly be assessed. When evaluating individual projects, the following should be considered: **employment opportunities for local people, project sustainability, quality of local production, impacts on children and youth**. Regarding the economical perspective and efficiency, the evaluation of project economical performance was the most critical.

The most significant positive impacts of Leader as experienced in the Czech Republic

Positive impacts mainly on the basis of experience from the period of 2004-2006 have been evaluated by the managing authority of the Leader sub-measure (Ministry of Agriculture of the CR) and may be summarized for most of the enrolled regions as follows:

- LAGs have become aware of the necessity to create **reserves of high-quality projects**.
- Most LAG members have become to understand the principle of the bottom-up approach very well; it is a matter of cooperation.
- **Self governing** has improved and **democracy** on the local level has deepened.
- **Economic activity** has strengthened; **stability of rural areas** has increased.
- The **image of rural areas** has improved.
- The **identity, self definition** and **coherence of the local societies** have strengthened.
- **Cultures** in rural areas have become **more variable**.
- Overall, **rurality is becoming a value**.

Sustainability of Local Action Groups

The sustainability of LAGs depends on the following conditions:

- It is necessary to strictly select only LAGs which function properly and in compliance with Leader principles.
- LAGs should always be opened to new members and to the public as well. Support should be provided not only to LAG members but also to all people living in the particular LAG's region.
- Staff alteration in reasonable situations and continuous membership strengthening should be carried out. It is unacceptable for one person to be, for example the manager of one LAG and a member of the evaluating committee or even a member of another LAG at the same time.
- Continuous lifelong learning and qualification should be provided to all LAG members.
- A consistent professionalization must be ensured. The management of LAGs must fully be professionalized by the year 2013 in order to ensure continuation even in the next period of 2014 – 2020.
- One of the decisive conditions for sustainability of LAGs is multiple-source financing.

Constraints in implementation at the national level and their possible solutions

- Some LAGs have to improve responsibility for the whole area of development – be more active and cooperate with municipalities and the ministry. Compared to the last period experience LAGs should effort more from “animation groups” and increase work quality by hiring administrative staff – especially in big LAGs (a manager, a secretary, an accountant) or by issuing regular annual reports and audit.
- Especially in the beginning of Leader implementation, some Czech LAGs have been established only to get money from the Leader programs. And when they failed and their application was not approved they were disappointed (some of the LAGs are now dead.) But perhaps, the grand benefit is the opportunity to cooperate in the three local sectors together and be patient and make fundraising and project preparation as much as possible to be permanently in the game. It is best to start with smaller projects and gradually increase their scope.
- The idea that “EU sources are not the aim but a tool to achieve local aims in agreement with EU policy” should be strengthened. It is therefore necessary to continue teaching LAGs to orient themselves to other possible resources, such as private resources from the particular region, regional grant programmes, etc.
- The problem of occasional “local top-down” in a some LAGs occurred in a few cases. One of the best possible solutions for dealing with such a problem is being prepared for the problem to occur in the first place. It is essential to fully realize and accept not only the privileges of obtaining subsidy for strategy and project realization, but to be aware of all relevant responsibilities as well.
- Mainly in the first years of Leader implementation, the participation of NGOs was not sufficient, which resulted in an unbalanced composition of LAGs not representing adequately the existing local interest groups. Conflict of interests often threatened the proper functioning of a LAG. However, nowadays, this problem seems to have been overcome and it can be stated, that through the years of Leader experience most LAGs successfully meet the requirement of a well balanced group and are conscious of their rights, engagements and duties.

Overall assessment of the Leader+ approach implementation in the Czech Republic

In these days, we do not have exact data on how many approved projects have failed and it has been only a short time for such an evaluation. However, the percentage acts as rather low.

Despite the short experience with the Leader approach in the CR, we may state that overall results and achievements to date have displayed their singularity and extraordinary contribution to the development of rural regions. Already during the first three years of the Leader+ approach's application in the Czech Republic (2004 - 2006) we can see high interest in the implementation among rural people and the countryside of this method, which further continues to grow.

Further information on the Leader+ initiative

<http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/>

<http://www.mze.cz>

<http://www.leaderplus.cz>