
REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

Innovative Democratic Potential of Local Action Groups: The Case of 'Moravian Way' LAG (Czech Republic)

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This study focuses on distinct local platforms referred to as Local Action Groups (LAGs), territorially defined groups of local actors originally designed for regional economic development, with the aim to analyze their innovative democratic potential. Exploring the case of the 'Moravian way' LAG (the Czech Republic), we examine how this tool can be, under certain conditions, successful in developing its participatory and deliberative features along with enhancing dynamic participation and involvement of citizens and other local actors. We study the deliberative practices that were used during the process of developing the local strategy and its evaluation within the territory of this particular LAG.

Keywords: Evaluation; Community-Led Local Development; Participation; Actors; Local Action Groups

Introduction

Processes undermining democracy and political crises have led, over the last decade, to the intensification of theoretical debates regarding innovative tools aimed to support increased civic participation in political processes, thus improving politics and, by extension, social life as such. Since around the 1970s, procedures to implement democratic innovations (DIs) have been analyzed.¹ DIs existing in many different forms endeavor to revitalize democratic processes on various systemic levels of government. They are defined as 'processes or institutions that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance, and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence' (Elstub & Escobar 2019: 11). The primary environment for new participative tools has been at the level closest to citizens, i.e. local, which brings horizontal diffusion (e.g. into other political contexts), and vertical (to other system levels) (Fung 2006; Geissel 2009; Newton 2012). The current problems of civic participation and the introduction of DIs on the local level include an even stronger call in post-communist territories. If post-communist countries are characterized by a lower interest of citizens towards politics, increased mistrust of political institutions and politics as such (Guasti & Mansfeldová 2018), higher participation in local politics could then partially change their general view of politics. The formulation remains on the level of preliminary hypothesis, though, as further research evidence has yet to be collected.

In this study we focus on distinct local platforms—Local Action Groups (LAGs)—as territorially defined groups of local actors born from EU LEADER cooperation designed for 'implementing of local development strategies' (Menconi et al. 2018), with the aim to discuss their innovative democratic potential. Exploring the case of the Moravian way LAG, we examine how this tool primarily designed for territorial economic development often characterized by quite formalized participative procedures can be, under certain conditions, successful in developing its deliberative features, as deliberation contributes to balancing the interests of individual actors (Atkinson & Zimmermann 2018). The conditions necessary for the development of the democratic potential of LAGs are identified alongside describing major tools and participatory and deliberative methods that were used during the processes of local strategy development and its evaluation within the territory of a specific LAG.

LAGs interconnect local territorial development with local representative participation (European Commission 2014). While the economic development remains the primary goal of LAGs, and LAGs are successful in this regard (Konečný et al. 2020), they also enhance local community coherence through participation and community development. However, LAGs as a participative tool remain on the edge of scholarly interest and literature, with attempts to explore their democratic potential being rather limited (Granberg et al. 2016). In this study, we would like to address this research gap.

LAGs as participatory platforms in the Czech Republic

LAGs have become a major tool for the application of the LEADER approach under the EU's Common Agriculture Policy (CAP). The initial LEADER project ('Liaison entre

actions de développement de l'économie rurale') was introduced in 1988 as an initiative of the European Commission. The LEADER Programmes have developed into an innovative tool to tackle rather farmer-oriented CAP measures and, by adopting a bottom-up territorial approach, included other members of the rural community (Espancia et al. in Menconi et al. 2018: 1–2). LAGs enabled a more flexible withdrawal of funds by avoiding lengthy bureaucratic procedures. Based on a community-led local development strategy, LAGs may apply for financial grants to implement specific projects that were negotiated and assessed through LAGs' internal decision-making processes as important for the development of the particular territory.

LAGs bring together representatives of municipalities, non-governmental organizations, entrepreneurs and members of SMEs, whose shared goal is to support the development of the region or territory in question. In addition to these strategic actors, LAGs also count on active citizens who they regard as partners not only for rural development but also for cooperation across the whole territory. Aside from economic factors, Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)² also emphasizes social, participative and environmental aspects. LAGs are not public administration tools but rather voluntary groupings for cooperation among municipalities. They offer an opportunity for quite flexible, inclusive and dynamic approach to solving problems, faced on the local level, that cannot be addressed solely within the public administration system and require wider and deeper engagement of actors, that is, other subjects and citizens.

LAGs emerged in the Czech Republic approximately ten years after the platform was introduced in Western Europe. The information and promotional campaign relating to LEADER began in the CR in 2001; the preparation for the first LAGs started the following year. March 2004 saw the launch of the national LEADER Programme (2004–2008). Since then, the number of LAGs in the Czech Republic has increased enormously and LAGs are among the most widespread and successful forms of wider cooperation and development within municipalities. They currently cover approximately 90 percent of the territory of the Czech Republic and include more than 5,800 villages and towns (94 percent of all municipalities). Their success is largely due to the representation of three major actors—pillars on which the cooperation is based. In addition to representatives of public administration (most often mayors), they include local employers (self-employed persons, entrepreneurs) and the non-profit sector, primarily represented by local associations. Although one of the conditions for the existence of a LAG is that members of the public administration constitute less than 50 percent of the total number of members, it is mayors that play a fundamental role. The share of mayors is one of the basic conditions for the existence of a LAG. The number of mayors may vary in different LAGs but they are always present and acting as an essential component. Only mayors have the political responsibility within the LAG area—their role is crucial, as evidenced by research (Nevěděl & Horák 2015; Svobodová 2015). Experience to date has shown a change in the nature of their activity:

'LAGs' situation in the Czech Republic is gradually getting better with more and more experience and LAGs' activity approaches to the Leader principle. While in the previous programming period mainly hard infrastructure projects were supported, it seems that in the period 2014–2020 the activity moves rather to promote education, employment and environmental care ("soft" projects)' (Svobodová 2015: 1776).

A case study for Moravian Way LAG

The next part will focus on the utilization of participative and deliberative elements in internal decision-making processes of one specific LAG named as Moravian Way, which comprises 22 municipalities located in the Central Moravian region in the Eastern part of the Czech Republic. Two fundamental processes are addressed during which 1) actors are engaged in the development of a strategy (CLLD strategy of the Moravian Way LAG) and 2) the fulfilment of this strategy is assessed. The first process follows the participation of actors from the LAG territory in the development of the strategy between the years 2012 and 2015, focusing primarily on their utilization of the participative and deliberative methods during the development.³ The second case concentrates on the utilization of the group conversation method conducted by an external facilitator (co-evaluator) during the mid-term evaluation of the LAG strategy, mainly regarding the management and employees of the LAG. The capture and evaluation of this second process provided the deeper insight needed for the evaluation activities, approaches and their methods and tools applied during the whole process.

The following part is primarily based on expert round tables with the LAG office staff, analyses of recordings of structured qualitative interviews with mayors; available interview surveys; documents such as the Community-Led Local Development Strategy; and minutes of the LAG general meetings, and participative surveys of meetings of the LAG office staff held on 3 July 2018 and 2 January 2019. The expert round tables were conducted as part of the mid-term evaluation process, as specified below. All the supporting documents were provided by the LAG staff, mostly regarding strategy implementation. The focus was shifted onto the participative aspects of the project from the position of LAG territory actors.

Interviews and documents elaborated by the LAG, and especially the Community-Led Local Development Strategy (for 2014–2020) (CLLD strategy 2015), indicate that the strategy was developed using both participative and expert methods alongside aspects of deliberation, all being in agreement with one another. A basic overview of the course and tools used in developing the strategy in the LAG territory, amounting to roughly 250 pages, appears as follows.

Interview survey (questionnaire)

An interview survey in the form of a questionnaire was administered to citizens of the LAG territory. The answer sheets were distributed to households or published in municipal journals. The response rate was low, with only 56 citizens having participated. The goal was to determine

how citizens, e.g. found out about LAG activities, how the LAG was promoted or if they ever encountered any projects implemented by the LAG. Respondents could also specify what they were missing the most from the municipalities.

Structured interviews with mayors

Structured interviews were conducted with the mayors of all the municipalities in the territory of the Moravian Way LAG in the second half of 2012. The mayors were specifically interviewed on the municipal and technical infrastructure, social life in the municipality, associations, subsidies and project ideas. The mayors' approach was active.

Interview survey of entrepreneurs and non-governmental organizations

Local entrepreneurs (self-employed persons) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) received a questionnaire in which the authors of the upcoming strategy inquired about the functioning of the LAG and its benefits for the municipalities. The entrepreneurs and the NGOs were also asked about their future project plans.

This was followed by two public discussions held in two municipalities in November 2012 and April 2013, both intended for the general public of the LAG territory. Work on the strategy continued in groups, with specifications made for the priorities and the financial balance sheet. Public hearings in almost all the municipalities in the LAG territory were held in 2014 as part of the preparation of the Strategy CLLD for the period 2014–2020. The aim was to determine the needs of individual municipalities. The hearings were attended by 199 actors—72 NGO members, 54 citizens, 43 public administration representatives and 23 local entrepreneurs.

Pilot community hearing

During the strategy development stage, the fifth largest municipality of the LAG held a pilot community hearing aimed at gathering information about community life. The main aspects were the suggestions and observations presented by the citizens. The outputs were incorporated in the analytical part of the strategy (CLLD strategy 2015). The investigation was carried out in three different steps. Initially, an interview survey was conducted with the residents of the municipality. The implementers distributed 570 questionnaires in total, 176 of which returned, i.e. the response rate was 31 percent. The questionnaire concentrated on suggestions and proposals regarding the municipal life. Subsequently, a community hearing was held with members of municipal associations, in which all the thirteen active associations participated. Finally, a public tour of the municipality led by the mayor and members of the local authority was organized (approx. 40 citizens took this option), aimed at discussing local affairs (successes and problems). All the citizens were regularly informed in the local newsletter about the major problems of the village, e.g. design of public spaces or re-building of roads.

After the tour, a debate presided over by an experienced facilitator followed. The debate represented a final stage

of the open participative process, which was characterized by deliberative features: 1) problems learning, 2) participative observation (tour), 3) intensive discussion between participants, 4) thorough exchange of different views that enabled hearing of diverse opinions. This type of facilitated discussion respecting the basic rules of deliberation in form, i.e. equality among participants, and in quality, i.e. intensity of the process, led to clear and specific results—the formulation of the main inputs to the CLLD Strategy.

The procedure brought a very positive response, as one of the participants noted: 'This is how decisions should be made: explain the problem on the spot, introduce it to the citizens and finally take a decision.' All the findings served as sources for strategy development.

The overview of the methods used makes it apparent that strategies are primarily developed using proved tools such as interviews and surveys. Digital participation tools, the fastest growing segment of DIs, were not used for strategy development. According to the implementers, conventional tools are sufficient in rural spaces to ensure the successful cooperation of actors when developing a strategy.⁴

The process of evaluation of the implementation of the CLLD Strategy is another point of interest in terms of the forms and modalities of actors' participation. It should be noted that the self-assessment report is an administratively demanding and time-consuming document. It is intended for LAG management to reflect on its work and conduct self-evaluation, primarily based on data collection, document analyses, the implementation of round tables results and subsequent assessments. The Czech Ministry for Local Development (MMR), as a supervisory body, only carried out a formal review, resulting in a document of over 60 pages, without checking the content. Quite a disquieting moment occurred when one of the executive directors from MMR even recommended that LAGs hire an external company to draw up the evaluation, although such a company would charge as much as USD 12,000 for this task.

The concrete evaluation goals were established to assess the relevance and targeting of the strategy goals, activities and processes as well as progress in the fulfillment of goals in order to identify and remove possible deficiencies and streamline the activities. Finally, the aim was also to assess and document possible contributions of the CLLD strategy to the creation of an added value in the territory of Moravian Way LAG (Šaradín 2019):

Regarding methodology, the evaluation was performed by two major tools—document analysis and two round tables.⁵ Preparations for the strategy evaluation within the Moravian Way LAG began in July 2018. An external facilitator⁶ participated in conducting round tables and the following formulation of the outcomes of these proceedings, which became the basis for the evaluation, but also for the proposal of the management recommendations. The facilitator also focused on compliance with MMR guidelines for evaluation (which include recommendations for methods and questions). Based on the quality of the submitted materials and the overall approach, it was observed by the evaluator already

in the very initial stages of the process that the LAG had become a more professional and established part of the territory.

Questions for round tables were formulated on the basis of detailed document research and analyses, participative observations during meetings and all other tools, as described above and provided by the LAG.⁷ The evaluator conducted two round table sessions. The first, in January 2019, focused on the relevance of the CLLD Strategy. The other took place in February 2019 and was aimed at the outputs and results of the implementation of the CLLD Strategy. Social scientists from Palacký University were involved in this interview session, apart from the LAG's representatives. The aim was to examine how the strategy goals were set and how the actors engaged in achieving them.

The final CLLD Strategy of the Moravian Way LAG can be considered very successful. Between the years 2016 and 2018, the LAG announced a total of eight calls within four Operational Programmes, and selected 44 projects to be implemented.⁸ With respect to the distribution of funds within the LAG territory, there was at least one project supported in almost every municipality. This success rate and generally positive results prove the particularly high quality of the Strategy as a meaningful and well-prepared document. This was very likely due to the employment of well-managed tools and participative and deliberative methods used during the process of strategy development, where the priorities were set clearly and realistically, allowing the actors to successfully participate.

Conclusion

In the academic literature, LAGs tend to be evaluated mainly in terms of their effectiveness and the functionality of inter-municipal cooperation. Their democratic potential and consensual way of finding solutions and achieving goals are often neglected. In this study, we explored the innovative democratic potential of LAGs, examining the case of the Moravian Way LAG. We consider LAGs an adequate structure for the current method of local governance as they stress community planning and civic participation. Our findings have led to the conclusion that LAGs' innovative democratic potential is conditioned especially by active participation of three major pillars for community development – local governments, various local actors and citizens, with mayors as representatives of the local executive playing a very important role. In the case of the Czech Republic, this is enhanced by the structure, size and number of municipalities and villages that are members of LAGs as well as by the strong personalization of local politics supporting the role of mayors as important figures who facilitate the process of local civic engagement. A second condition is connected with setting up approaches, sequencing individual phases and choosing tools that will allow successful participation while offering room for deliberation as opposed to generally formalized participative mechanisms based on recommended standards set by the rules. What also plays an important role is LAGs' managerial abilities. In our case, professionalization along with managerial and administrative skills was on quite a high level.

The examination of the decision-making process leading to adoption and then to assessment of the CLLD Strategy in the case of the Moravian Way LAG confirms the innovative democratic potential of LAGs. It was showed that LAGs can be innovative in their features (context and methods) as well as they 'reimagine and deepen the role of citizens (...) by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence' (Elstub & Escobar 2019: 11). This mainly economic tool for community development may, if the preliminary conditions identified above are fulfilled, serve as a dynamic participative platform that enables deliberation as the most intense mode of decision-making (Elstub & Escobar 2017: 18). In our case, the deliberative features were examined and identified in the processes of preparing the CLLD Strategy and its evaluation. Deliberation was intensely present during the pilot community hearing. The round table format based on the selective participation of participants then showed to be a suitable deliberative platform in the case of evaluation process.

What should be emphasized is that LAGs generally represent a highly heterogeneous local platforms, which can differ immensely across European Union member states. This means that their democratic potential needs to be analyzed in specific varying contexts. Thus, the experience from the Czech Republic and the case of the Moravian Way LAG does not represent a valid case or a transferable experience for other contexts.

Notes

- ¹ According to Geissel (2009:53), DIs, the forms of which have been defined and typologized in different ways in academic literature, include 1) co-governance (for example, through a participatory budget, planning, etc.); 2) direct democracy (for example, referenda, legislative acts); 3) deliberation (for instance, civil juries, debates, Local Agenda 21); and 4) electoral reforms. Another type of DI 'family' relates to technology – E-democracy has been addressed by Newton (2012: 8–9), digital participation and its tools by Elstub and Escobar (2017) – and this can be viewed as a fast-developing type of DI utilized most frequently in combination with other methods and practices.
- ² CLLD is generally defined by the European Commission as a 'specific tool for use at a sub-regional level' of which the LAGs are one of the key components (European Commission March 2014).
- ³ Data used in this text are taken from CLLD Strategy (2015) and notes from the evaluation (Šaradín 2019).
- ⁴ It was also claimed that there is little awareness about other types of participative tools and DIs (Šaradín 2019).
- ⁵ In addition to round tables and document analyses, the LAG staff also conducted structured interviews in preparation for the evaluation basis, wherein project applicants were the only respondents. Their inquiries were mainly aimed at the evaluation of the efficiency, processes of address and readiness and comprehensibility of the calls.
- ⁶ The co-author of this article.

⁷ Example of questions: To what extent is the course of implementation of the SCLLD in accordance with the planned timetable of the calls?; To what extent did the projects in the individual Programming Frameworks lead to improvement of local administration, i.e. to higher engagement of the public and target groups in the preparations of a project and/or the formulation of problems and needs?; To what extent did the attained indicator values correspond to the fulfilment of the CLLD strategy financial plan?; To what extent are the outputs, results, and impact, attained in the individual Programming Frameworks, truly sustainable?; To what extent did the interventions (projects) in the Programming Frameworks lead to achieving unforeseen positive or negative results?

⁸ Two applicants subsequently withdrew from the project implementation.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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