

STRATEGIES FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN BULGARIA WITHIN THE LEADER APPROACH

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The LEADER approach has been integrated within the EU policy for rural areas since 2007. Each program for the rural development must have component Leader for leading development strategies. The purpose of the paper is to evaluate the preparation of strategies for the rural development and on this base to make generalized conclusions about the problems that have Local active groups (LAGs) in preparing their strategies and proposals related to the implementation of the projects included in local development strategies. The first part of the paper presents the LEADER approach and the budget of the measure 4.1 "Implementation of local development strategies" from the Rural Development Program 2007–2013. In the second part of the paper the preparation of local development strategies is evaluated on the base of survey. On this basis have been made generalized conclusions about the problems that have LAGs by preparing strategies for rural development and proposals related to the implementation of projects included in them have been given.

Key words: local active group; strategy; rural development

СТРАТЕГИИ ЗА РУРАЛЕН РАЗВОЈ ВО БУГАРИЈА ВО РАМКИТЕ НА ПРИСТАПОТ LEADER

Пристапот LEADER е интегриран во рамките на политиките на ЕУ за руралните средини од 2007 до 2013. Секоја програма за рурален развој мора да содржи компонента LEADER за водечките стратегии за развој. Целта на овој труд е да се оцени подготовката на стратегиите за рурален развој и врз основа на тоа да се направат генерализирани заклучоци во врска со проблемите што ги имаат локалните активни групи (LAG) во подготовката на нивните стратегии и предлози во врска со спроведувањето на проектите содржани во локалните развојни стратегии. Првиот дел од трудот го претставува пристапот LEADER и буџетот на мерката 4.1 „Спроведување на стратегии за локален развој“ од Програмата за рурален развој 2007–2013. Во вториот дел од трудот врз основа на анкета се оценува подготовката на стратегиите за локален развој. Врз основа на ова се направени генерализирани заклучоци во врска со проблемите кои ги имаат LAG со изготвување на стратегии за рурален развој и се даваат предлози во врска со спроведувањето на проектите содржани во нив.

Клучни зборови: локална активна група; стратегија; рурален развој

INTRODUCTION

The Leader approach of the European Commission is quite new and different from the main initiatives of the European Union, although the approach is evolving with the rest programs of the CAP. In Bulgaria, the Leader approach is the fourth axis within the Rural Development Programme 2007–2013 and it is applied in territorial principle in all 231 rural municipalities in the country. For realizing the aims of Axis 4 at least

2.6% of program budget for rural development are planned. It is 76.99 million euros for the period 2007-2013 (European and national funds).

Axis 4 contains three measures and two sub-measures. One of the measures is the measure 4.1 "Implementation of local development strategies" and it aims to provide a basis for medium and a long term sustainable development in rural areas through the implementation of a "bottom-up" and encourage "learning by doing" in local communi-

ties, enhancing their capacity for planning. Furthermore, it is directed to diversify economic activities to improve the competitiveness of local products, to preserve natural resources and environment in rural areas and to develop better services in accordance with needs and expectations of local communities, such as to create opportunities for long-term employment, to raise incomes in rural communities and to promote integrated and sustainable practices. This measure is applied throughout the program period 2007–2013 and started in December 2008.

The minimum amount of total public contribution from the Rural Development Program in the budget of a local development strategy is the equivalent of one million euros and the maximum

amount is two million euros. Additional funding of the local development strategy is acceptable and it could be 25% of the initially approved budget of the strategy. Up to 20% of the total public contribution from the Rural Development Program may be provided to finance the management of the LAG and the acquisition of skills and social activities, if it is specified in the budget of the local development strategy. Moreover, the maximum value of a project can not exceed the equivalent of 200 thousand euros.

The budget for the measure 4.1 "Implementation of local development strategies" in Rural Development Program is the equivalent of 27 million euros and the quantitative parameters of the measure are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Quantitative parameters of the measure 4.1 "Implementation of local development strategies" in Bulgaria for the period 2007–2013

Measure	Type	Indicators	Aim 2007–2013
4.1. Implementation of local development strategies	General	Number of supported LAGs	50
	General	Total area of LAGs, sq. km	36 000
	General	Number of projects financed by LAGs	2 500
	General	Population in the territory covered by LAGs	1 260 000
	General	Total number of created job	300
	General	Number of participants successfully completed the training	5000
	Additional	Number of supported potential LAGs under the measure 431-2	60

Source: MAF (2007): *Rural development program 2007–2013*.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAME

The purpose of the paper is to evaluate the preparation of strategies for the rural development and on this base to make generalized conclusions about the problems that Local active groups (LAGs) have in preparing their strategies and proposals related to the implementation of the projects included in local development strategies.

The data on which the report is based are part of the research project "Possibilities of LEADER approach for development of viable rural areas and protection of natural recourses" (3). The methodological framework of the study includes an analysis on the regional level, which contains evaluations of LAG members about the problems and possibilities of the LEADER approach to

achieve the rural development. Opinions and estimates of the LAG members and of experts in municipal administration have been examined.

Objects of the study are problems associated with the preparation of strategies for the regional development.

The study of the process and problems in the preparation and adoption of local development strategies is done in three stages.

The first stage was carried out selecting objects of the survey. The survey includes the territories of 21 municipalities in different areas with potential for creation of fourteen local active groups. They represent 14% of municipalities, realizing the Leader approach in Bulgaria.

On the second stage structured interviews were carried out with representatives of local ac-

tive groups and administrative leaders about the problems of preparation, launch and implementation of projects. On the third stage of the study analysis and assessment of problems in working out local development strategies were realized.

Evaluation of the preparation of strategies for development of rural regions

Data on the distribution of respondent's estimations for work to create development strategies show that most of the evaluations are defined as usual small difficulties. They reach 69% in studies and analyzes of the region for the preparation of the local development strategy and organizing the activities of the local groups.

The most significant dispersing in the responses is observed in assessments of technical and financial security of the team engaged in the

preparation of the local development strategy. There are differences in responses of the local action group's member whose beneficiaries are municipalities and organizations from the non-profit sector.

Evaluations of the representatives from the non-profit sector are more negative. The last two stages of evaluations "difficulties threatening realizing the project" and "significant difficulties" are identified by representatives of LAG Bansko and LAG Panagyurishte–Strelcha–Lesichovo. The reasons are mainly in the fact that beneficiaries in both cases are representatives of NGO's with limited options for financing the activities of the project (Figure 1). Significant difficulties and difficulties threatening the realization of the project are connected with the technical and financial insurance of the team engaged in the preparation of the strategy.

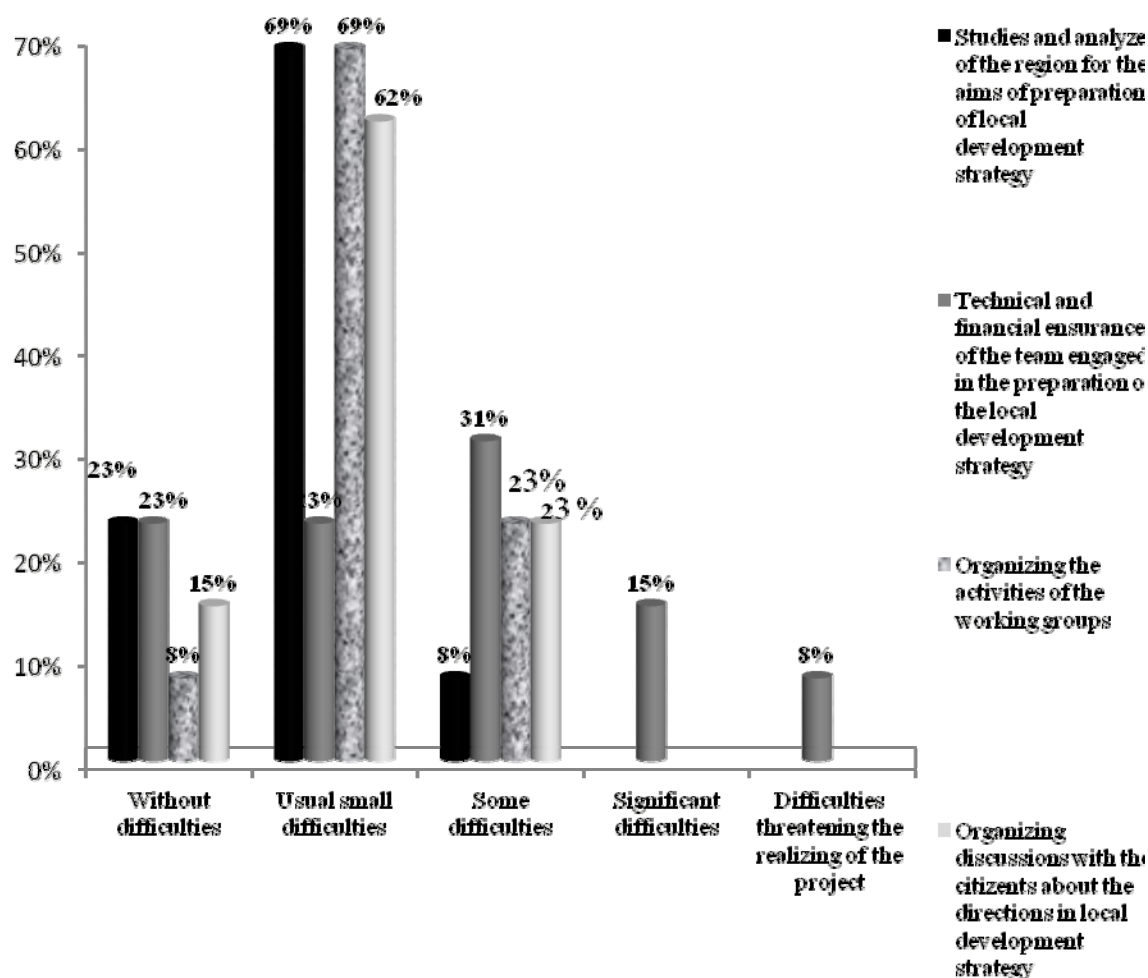


Fig. 1. Distribution of the evaluations of respondents about the activities connected with the creation of Local development strategies (%)

One of the project activities that is with significant importance for the creation of strategies is organizing the working groups. 69% of respondents evaluated this activity as to be accompanied by "usual small difficulties". They are defined as the need for an initial becoming closer to the positions of representatives of business and non-profit sectors for some of the problems and priorities of municipalities and areas of potential LAGs.

The evaluations about the problems connected with organizing discussions with citizens about the directions in local development strate-

gies are almost the same like the previous evaluation. The main part of the responses are defined as "usual small problems" (62%) and 23% of the respondents choose the answer – "some difficulties".

The answers of the questions about the conflicts between different interest groups in the process of creating a local development strategy are connected with the view of respondents that they had lively discussions when they were creating the strategies, but they didn't have the characteristics of a conflict (Fig. 2).

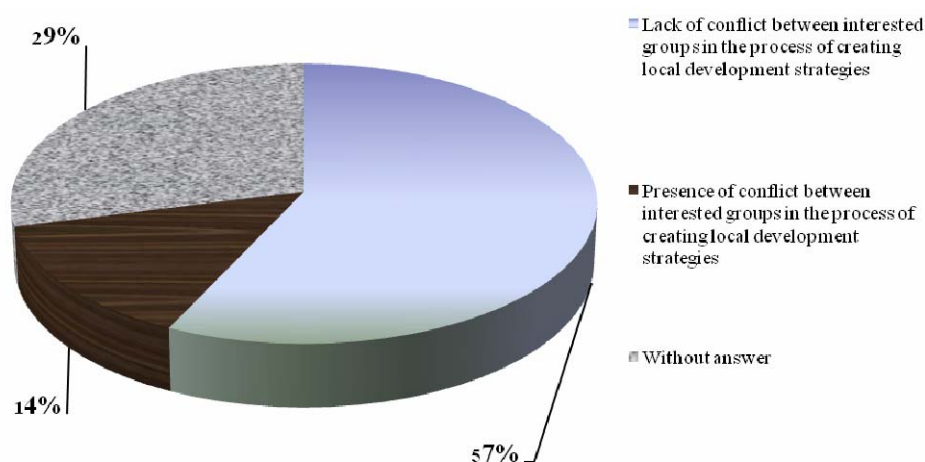


Fig. 2. Conflict between interested groups in the process of creating local development strategies

57% of the respondents shared the view that there were no conflicts between interested groups in the process of creating a local development strategy and only 14% of the respondents shared the view for existence of a conflict. According to the information from the local press there were conflict situations created by LAG in municipalities Sredez and Sandanski which were provoked by the illegitimacy of the part of the participants in the meetings.

The comparative analysis of the problems in implementing the various components of the projects for establishment of LAGs indicates at least difficulties by promoting local development strategies among the public and preparing applications for financing.

A significant variance in evaluations occurred in promoting activities from the project among the public. Usual small difficulties occurred in 53% of cases and significant difficulties in 5% of cases. As significant difficulties are defined the disputes in relation to persons involved in the working

groups and the local leaders who are not accepted by all citizens, such as the impact by the evaluation of project activities.

The development and publishing of information materials did not constrain the project teams (Table 2). 92% of the respondents indicated that they had not problems with them. Only one of the LAGs is listed as usual small difficulties.

Preparing the final version of local development strategy, some difficulties were created only in one of the local action groups. Furthermore 62% of the cases were accompanied by usual small difficulties of the finalization of the strategy and they were related on the one hand to meet the requirements for the content of the strategy and on the other hand to reflect the specifics of the potential territory of LAG.

Preparation of documents for application to LAG did not create any problems in 46% of cases and usual small difficulties in 46% of them. Only 8% of the respondents shared a view that they had some difficulties.

Table 2

Distribution of the opinion according to the problems that the LAGs have by promoting the local development strategy and preparing the applications for financing (%)

	Without difficulties	Usual small difficulties	Some difficulties	Significant difficulties	Difficulties threatening the realization of the project
Promoting activities from the project among the public	26	53	16	5	–
Development and publishing information materials	92	8	–	–	–
Preparing the final version of the local development strategy	23	62	18	–	–
Preparation of documents for application	46	46	8	–	–

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the evaluations of respondents the following general conclusions for the preparation of development strategies in Bulgaria can be made:

- Preparation of development strategies as a whole did not make difficulties for LAGs.

- Most of the respondents shared the view that they had usual small difficulties in studies and analyses of the region for the preparation of local development strategies and organizing the activities of LAGs. In this regard further training is necessary as for the municipal administration such as for the participants in the LAGs. Evaluations of the administrative capacity and the municipal administration show that they have to increase knowledge especially in the direction that is connected with their ability to develop and manage projects, because the municipal administration has a leading role in the project cycle. This can be achieved by involving local nongovernmental organizations (NGO), which have the potential to participate mainly in the initial and the final phase of the project process;

- Preparation of development strategies is relatively more difficult for representatives of NGOs. Some of them shared the view that they have difficulties that threaten the project and significant difficulties due to the limited possibilities for financing project activities and technical and financial insurance of the team engaged in preparation of the strategy such as difficulties connected with the time for payment. The lack of opportunity to advance payment is the reason for the difficul-

ties associated with providing funds for the projects. In this connection it is necessary to ensure easier access to credit for beneficiaries in order to realize investment in the project. Experience in developed countries shows that the state and the guarantees of loans could be effective tools to support the financial position of the LAGs;

- Most of the respondents shared the view that conflicting situations did not arise among the various interested groups in the process of creating a local development strategy, despite lively discussions. Improving coordination and decreasing the conflicts between participants in the projects could be achieved by implementing a monitoring connected with decision making and operational implementation. In this connection it is possible and appropriate a team to be formed as a monitoring committee, supervisory board or an advisory committee within the Governing Board of the LAGs.

- Relatively fewer difficulties are observed by promoting strategies for the local development among public and preparation of documents for application. Most of the respondents shared the view that they did not have difficulties connected with the development and publishing information materials (92%). They have usual small difficulties by promoting the activities from the project among the public (53%) and preparing the final version of the local development strategy (62%). In this point of view it is necessary interested citizen to be more informed about the investments that they could make and to receive the information for the projects, which are developed in the specific region. Visibility of projects and an active communication

between the citizens would increase their competence and they could be involved in most phases of the project cycle. On the other hand attempts to consult the citizens throughout the whole project process are an effective way to create a civic responsibility and commitment to the local government. It is possible citizens to participate in the maintenance and funding small projects within the LAGs.

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