 IMPLEMENTATION EVALUATION OF STRATEGIES OF LOCAL ACTION GROUPS IN LATVIA

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The present research on local action groups (LAGs) in Latvia was performed within the measure “Analysis of LAG Activity and the Restoration of the LEADER Manual” for the National Rural Network of the Latvian Rural Advisory and Training Centre Ltd. A local action group or partnership is an association of local organisations and rural residents that operates in a certain rural area with the number of population ranging from 5 to 65 thousand, represents interests of this territory, and takes care of rural development issues at the local level. The research aim is to evaluate the strategy introduced by LAGs for 2009-2013 and work out suggestions for its improvement. The local development strategy of LAGs is implemented in the form of projects, and it is possible to attract financial support from measures co-financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Fisheries Fund (EFF) for its implementation in the period 2009-2013.

The monographic and descriptive methods as well as analysis and synthesis, the graphical method, documentary analysis, data grouping, and sociological methods were extensively employed in the present research. It is based on analysis results of LAG strategies, data of the Rural Support Service (RSS), summarised results of a questionnaire survey and interviews of LAG representatives, survey results of residents living in LAG territories, as well as other publicly available documents.

After completing the present research, it was concluded that in Latvia, the majority of LAG project submitters who participate in implementing LAG strategies were associations, local governments and limited liability companies, farms, and others. The project submitters surveyed pointed to key problems that arise in developing a project according to a LAG strategy. They are: filling in economic data, tables; defining goals and structuring a strategy; understanding the following terms: strategy, action, activity etc.; lack of experience. The territorial distribution of LAG projects is not even and perfect, and the main reasons for this problem are: a decrease in the number of residents, the lack of active residents, a large distance from the territory to its centre, no information is available to residents, the reluctance of residents to take financial liabilities and responsibly after a project is implemented, no residents having innovative and good ideas live in a certain territory.

Activities to be introduced to engage young people in implementing the strategy are mainly set in the LAG strategies, and special activities for implementing youth projects are outlined. Instead of mostly creating real jobs for young people, they are mainly engaged in voluntary work to clean up a recreational site, look after equipment, and engage others thinking the same way.

Keywords: strategy, found, LEADER, Local action group, local resident.

Introduction

The present research was performed within the measure “Analysis of LAG Activity and the Restoration of LEADER Manual” for the National Rural Network of the Latvian Rural Advisory and Training Centre Ltd. in year 2011.

Varied development of rural territories, including increasing the life quality of individuals living in rural territories, is regarded as important in the world and the EU.

LEADER represents targeted and inter-coordinated activities for rural development that motivate the public to search for new solutions to present rural problems. LEADER targets the improvement of life quality for rural residents by considering both economic and social improvements and environmental preservation opportunities.

A local action group or partnership is an association of local organisations and rural residents that operates in a certain rural area with the number of population ranging from 5 to 65 thousand, represents interests of this territory, and takes care of rural development issues at the local level.

The local development strategy of LAGs is implemented in the form of projects, and it is possible to attract financial support from measures co-financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Fisheries Fund (EFF) for its implementation in the period 2009-2013.

No research has been conducted on the effectiveness of implementing the LEADER program, but Svanberga L. (2009) did a research on the effectiveness of implementing LEADER* in Jelgava district, but in 2007 she researched rural partnerships in Zemgale region. Kruzmetra M. (2009, 2010), in her turn, described possibilities for a partnership as one of the opportunities for getting loans in rural territories. Paura L. (2007, 2008), made researches about partnerships from Sociological point.
But Lithuanian researchers characterized situation in Lithuanian Lag’s (Atkociūnienė, Petrauskienė, Tijūnaitienė, 2007).

Based on a random choice by the Ministry of Agriculture, 6 LAGs were requested to participate in the evaluation; of them, three are partnerships of Pieriga region (association “Pierigas partneriba”, rural partnership “Upe 8”, association of public and private partnerships “Zied zeme”), one partnership is from Latgale region – the partnership of Daugavpils and Iukste municipalities “Kaimiņi”, one from Vidzeme region – “Madonas novada fonds”, and one partnership is from Zemgale region – the Jelgava rural partnership “Lielupe”.

The research object is local actions groups, the research subject is urgency and implementation of a local action group’s strategy for the period 2009-2013. The research aim is to evaluate the strategy introduced by LAGs for 2009-2013 and work out suggestions for its improvement. The following research tasks were set to achieve the aim:

• to describe characteristics of LEADER programme and its establishment;
• to assess the urgency of the strategy of LAGs according to awareness of local residents;
• to assess the implementation of projects and the use of their funding within the strategy of LAGs.

The monographic and descriptive methods as well as analysis and synthesis, the graphical method, documentary analysis, data grouping, and sociological methods were extensively employed in the present research. It is based on analysis results of LAG strategies, data of the Rural Support Service (RSS), summarised results of a questionnaire survey and interviews of LAG representatives, survey results of residents living in LAG territories, as well as other publicly available documents.

Characteristics and historical background of LEADER

Rural development policy becomes a more and more important component of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). It promotes sustainable development in European rural territories by tackling economic, social, and environmental problems. LEADER is an innovative approach in the European Union (EU) rural development policy. (Leader piejēja, 2006).

Rural areas are a significant part of the European Union’s territory because more than 90% of the EU territory is rural areas and places of residence for more than 56% of the population. (Europe’s rural areas in..., 2008.) LEADER is an abbreviation for “links between actions of rural development” (in French “Liaison entre actions de développement rural”). According to the name of this program, it is a method to initiate and implement rural development in local rural communities instead of strictly setting measures to be implemented.

Seven criteria specify the LEADER approach:

1. Area based approach. It means that a development policy is based on the specifics, advantages, and disadvantages of any territory. In case of LEADER, such a territory is a homogenous rural area that is internally socially consolidated, it features common history and traditions, common identity awareness is inherent to its residents, etc.

2. Bottom-up approach. Its purpose is to promote the participation of residents in making decisions that relate to any aspect of development policy. The goal of this approach is to engage the individuals directly associated with territorial matters, including individuals as such, economic and social groups, as well as representatives of governmental and private bodies. The bottom-up approach became apparent in two ways: as “getting started” (promotion of activities) and as training local communities, besides, this approach is topical at various stages of development of this program. At the level of projects, it is important that individuals are directly associated with the territory and that project implementers consult with people who are interested in the outcome of projects.

3. Partnership approach and Local Action Groups (LAGs). A LAG is an association, established by governmental bodies and private individuals, whose participants have decided to work to jointly implement a local action plan (local program of territorial development), thus developing a LEADER territory. A LAG is one of the most original and strategic distinctive features of the LEADER approach. Owing to the experience of practitioners, the rights to make decisions, and a relatively large-size budget, a LAG is an organization of new type that can significantly affect institutional and political balance is a certain territory. A LAG is very appropriate for individuals which are directly associated with their territory, thus making them interested in and motivated and united for work on rural development. Such an approach requires cooperation among all participants (program manager, LAGs, LAG members), therefore, distributing tasks and duties among partners has to be clear and obvious.

4. Innovation. Along with the LEADER concept and its implementation in the field that is innovative in itself, an obligatory prerequisite is also the implementation of ideas in a nontraditional way. Participants have to try, for instance, in a different way to popularize local resources, expand the fields not included in development programs, work in order to explicitly expose the drawbacks and problems of rural territories, as well as introduce new products and processes, create new forms of organisation, and offer sales possibilities. The innovative approach is also reflected in program ideas that are dedicated to education and cooperation, i.e. other engaged individuals are informed about success, so that they get inspiration for activities in such a way, as well as joint projects are implemented.

5. Integrated approach. Activities and projects included in a local action plan are interconnected and coordinated as an entirety. Integration may relate both to ideas in one field and to all program ideas and to a specific group of ideas or, which is more important, to uniting various engaged individuals who work in economic, social, cultural, and environmental fields as well as to establishing links among various fields topical for the territory.

6. System formation and cooperation among regions. The LEADER system’s goal is to limit the isolation of
LAs and create possibilities to get information and analyse processes by assisting in sharing experiences on rural development policies and in disseminating information, including information on best practices and innovative strategies and ideas. Some LAs have established informal cooperation bodies for the purpose of contributing to cooperation network formation activities of European and national scales. A very important element of LEADER is also cooperation among rural territories. Not only regions of various countries, but also territories located within a country (by implementing internal cooperation) may cooperate. Cooperation projects in the LEADER program have their own budget.

7. Local financing and management. One more important distinctive feature of LEADER is that a large part of decision-making on funding and management is delegated to LAs. However, the extent of independence of LAs may significantly differ depending on the political and institutional context of a member country. Therefore, this criterion is not universal, and it has to be used taking into consideration the administrative situation of a particular territory (Leader+labākās prakses..., 2008).

The LEADER initiative emerged in relation to a reform of the Structural Funds (from 1989 to 1993). The European Commission started initiatives as an instrument to promote activities of special interest for the European Community (such as international cooperation) to introduce and examine new methods and new concepts which would be integrated into general programs in the future.

One of the initiatives of the European Community was LEADER I (1991-1993) (links among measures for developing rural economies). It was started in 1991 with the purpose of increasing the development potential of rural territories by stimulating initiatives of local residents, promoting skills development necessary for local needs, and spreading these skills in other rural territories.

It has to be admitted that in many countries, rural interests of wider scale, i.e. outside traditional economic sectors, were not taken into account in rural development programs, and mainly the bottom-up approach was employed in managing these programs.

Thus, LEADER began in an experimental way by uniting various matters, active participants, and resources of local level (by implementing the so called integrated development approach). The priority of local development was achieved by means of local action groups, in the establishment of which governmental and private sectors as well as volunteers who supervised the implementation of local LEADER programs participated.

The initial “phase” of LEADER, within which 217 local action groups operated in less developed rural territories, started in 1991. It enabled the establishment of networks and the exchange of ideas and experiences. The total EU investment amounted to EUR 417 million, which accounted for approximately 1% of the European Community’s support funding during the same period.

By 1994, LEADER II (1994-1999) had developed up to the so called general phase, and almost 1000 local action groups operated, given the special needs of regions of the new Nordic member countries. As a much larger program, LEADER II additionally included wider cooperation and innovations, and the exchange of patterns of experience along with the establishment of networks became possible across borders of territories and countries. In this period, an experimental project of LEADER was designed, which allowed trying new ideas.

LEADER+ (2000-2006) was established in 2000 as one of the four initiatives together with URBAN, INTERREG, and EQUAL which were financed by the EU Structural Funds, and, unlike LEADER I and II, it was available in all rural districts. It had three major activity directions and key strategic fields, and it was especially oriented towards partnership and network formation to exchange experiences. During the period of functioning of LEADER+, approximately EUR 5 billion was spent in 892 activities of selected 73 LAG programs at the national or local level. The cost refund request period ended at the end of 2008. The diversity of approaches in projects showed differences and a creative approach as well as a possibility to learn and cooperate at both regional and national and European levels in rural development strategies.

LEADER+ type activities were adopted in several new member countries. Any new rural development policy has to include the LEADER approach, especially the bottom-up approach, which allows local governments and communities to play a more leading role in working out and implementing the programs that are necessary to meet local needs. (Leader+ Magazine: uzmanības..., 2005)

In contrast with the previous programming period (2004-2006) when LEADER+ activities were implemented individually, the LEADER approach was more extensively used in the Rural Development Program for 2007-2013. (Valsts Lauku ņēm., 2007) Since 2007, funding for the LEADER Axis was allocated from the total package of funds received by any member country from the EU Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) to support its rural development. (Leader+ Magazine: uzmanības..., 2005)

To implement the LEADER approach in the programming period 2004-2006, 28 local action groups were established: 11 LAGs designed development strategies within the activity “Skills Development” (i.e. 40% of total territory of LAG activity) and 17 LAGs implemented development strategies within the activity “Experimental Strategies of Integrated Rural Development” (i.e. 60% of total territory of LAG activity). Of the funding of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, 2.5% was allocated for activities of Axis 4. (Valsts Lauku ņēm., 2009)

Since the beginning of establishment in 1991, LEADER provided EU rural communities with instruments for active formation of their future.

In the programming period 2007-2013, LEADER is not an individual program, but it is integrated (included) into all national/regional rural development programs. It provides new opportunities for using the LEDAER approach at a greater scale and a wider range of rural development activities as before.

In the programming period 2007-2013, to implement the LEDAER approach in Latvia, additional 12 local action groups were established, reaching a total of 40 local action groups. In this programming period from 2007 to 2013,
already 2280 local action groups in all EU member countries implement the LEDAER approach.

By means of LEADER, rural territories are urged to study new ways of increasing competitiveness, maximally exploiting their opportunities and overcoming problems they may face, such as population aging, poor availability of services, or lack of employment opportunities. In such a way, LEADER promotes an increase in life quality for both farmer families and other rural residents living in rural territories. In the LEDAER initiative, a comprehensive approach is used in tackling rural problems. It admits that the competitiveness of local residents in food production, an attractive environment, the creation of jobs are mutually complimentary aspects of rural life, the provision of which requires special skills and appropriate technologies and services and which have to be solved as an entirety with specially designed policy measures.

Since the beginning of establishment in 1991, the LEADER program has offered EU rural communities a new method for engaging local partners in territorial development. The interest aroused by LEADER has sometimes influenced actions of national, regional, and local government institutions and political positions, as it is able to tackle development problems by means of new forms of partnership and connective activities.

LEADER supplements other European and national programs. For instance, local resources may be activated and mobilised by means of LEADER activities by supporting pilot development projects (such as diagnostic studies and initial studies or development of local abilities and skills), which will increase the ability of these territories to obtain and use not only LEADER funding, but also other sources of funds to finance their development projects (for instance, EU and national rural and regional programs of larger scale). LEADER provides assistance to beneficiaries of other industries and categories who often do not receive another support or receive small support in accordance with other programs implemented in rural territories (for instance, cultural events, improvement of natural environment, restoration of buildings of architectural and cultural and historical heritage, rural tourism, improvement of links between producers and consumers).

LEADER urges the public and economic stakeholders to cooperate to produce goods and services that create as high value-added as possible in their local territory.

The establishment of information networks within LEADER includes the exchange of achievements, experiences, and knowledge among LEADER groups, rural territories, governmental institutions, and organisations involved in rural development in the EU territory regardless of whether they are direct LEADER beneficiaries. The establishment of such networks means transferring best practices, disseminating innovations, and improving experiences based on conclusions made on local rural development. By establishing such networks, links among individuals, projects, and rural territories are strengthened, thus assisting in overcoming isolation in which some rural regions exist. Establishing information networks may promote cooperation projects, thus assisting LEADER groups to establish mutual contacts. There are various types of networks.

- National, regional and local networks

In some member countries, networks or associations of LEADER groups emerged or were informally founded at local, regional, or national levels (for example, networks of groups in Ireland and Greece) or at the European level (for instance, the European LEADER Association for Rural Development - ELARD).

- Networks of institutions

Networks of institutions are financed by the European Commission which also sets tasks for the mentioned networks. The EU supports such networks of both European and national levels in which LEADER groups, governmental institutions, and all other interested partners which work in the field of rural development are united. Since 2007, the types of networks of institutions are as follows:

- the European Network for Rural Development (administered by the European Commission);
- the National Rural Network that has to be established in every EU member country.

The activity “Establishment of Cooperation and the Provision of Activity for National Rural Network Organisations and Institutions Engaged in Rural Development” of the support measure “Technical Assistance” in the Latvian Rural Development Program 2007-2013 envisages that the so called institutional network – the National Rural Network – will be established in Latvia in this period.

Based on positive experiences of LEADER networks in the previous programming period, the European Commission assigned a new challenge to the European Union member countries – to establish the National Rural Networks, which unites not only LEADER groups, but also all participants engaged in implementing the Rural Development Program 2007-2013, in this programming period.

Urgency of LAG strategy according to interests of residents and project submitters

A LAG implements its activity based on its local development strategy for the period 2009-2013. While designing their strategy, all the researched LAGs followed a pattern set in Cabinet Regulation No.515 “Procedure of Granting National and European Union Support for Implementing Local Development Strategies”, including their vision, goals, description of social, economic, and demographic situation, description of activities, SWOT analysis, description of previous experience of LAG, and other sections.

In LAG strategies, an action plan’s paragraphs and sections are renewed and updated as need arises, LAGs work on improving criteria if it is necessary to do it before a next strategy is designed. Yet, the other sections of strategy are not updated, for instance, that of social, economic, and demographic situation.

The implementation of strategies continues, therefore, it is necessary to update them periodically by supplementing them with the latest information that is important for residents of local territorial partnership who still want to find their occupation in order to improve their own life quality and that of others.

To find out the observance of interests of residents while implementing the strategy, questionnaires were disseminated among residents of all the six LAG territories; 480 filled-
in and valid questionnaires were received back. The largest proportion of respondents or 27% come from the partnership “Zied zeme”, the proportion of other LAGs ranged from 14 to 16%.

![Graph showing percentage distribution of information possessed by the respondents on a LAG and its activity](image)

**Figure 1. Percentage distribution of information possessed by the respondents on a LAG and its activity**

The majority of respondents know or has heard that such a local action group exists. Most respondents (89%) come from the territory of the PPP association “Zied zeme” and are informed or have heard that such a partnership operates in their territory. The majority of respondents (more than 50%) who know or have heard about a LAG come from Riga region in which three researched partnerships operate: “Pierīgas partnerība”, the PPP association “Zied zeme”, and the rural partnership “Upe 8”.

However, the largest number of respondents who has never heard about a LAG are residents from the territory of the partnership “Kaimiņi” (61%), that of “Madonas novada fonds” (52%), and that of the partnership “Lielupe” (41%). Outside Riga region, the number of respondents really knowing what a LAG is ranges around 30%, therefore, the partnerships have to inform residents of their territory and potential project submitters about their strategy and the LEADER program. It is possible there are individuals who would gladly like to take part in activities carried out by a LAG.

To the majority of respondents, an action plan worked out in the strategies of LAGs seems very topical, or the majority of activities in the strategies, according to them, are urgent and correspond to interests and problems of residents. For instance, it is 79% of residents living in the territory of the PPP association “Zied zeme”, 62% in that of the partnership “Upe 8”, and a similar situation is in the territory of “Pierīgas partnerība” with 52%.

However, 17% of residents from the territory of the partnership “Kaimiņi”, 13% from that of “Pierīgas partnerība”, and 20% from that of “Madonas novada fonds” believe that the strategy is not topical or only a few actions of it are topical. Since the partnerships implement their strategies through projects for the purpose of providing high life quality for rural residents, one of the most essential questions was related to whether the respondents have noticed positive changes in the territory where they live or often stay.

![Table showing percentage distribution of respondent opinions on changes in the surrounding environment](image)

**Figure 2. Percentage distribution of respondent opinions on changes in the surrounding environment**

The data obtained in the survey show that the majority of respondents have noticed changes around themselves, for example, most of them, i.e. on average 37% of their total number, have noticed that the surrounding environment has improved. Changes in the surrounding environment have been noticed by 30% of respondents from the territory of the partnership “Kaimiņi”, 35% - “Madonas novada fonds”, 51% - the association “Pierīgas partnerība”, 25% - the association “Zied zeme”, 51% - the partnership “Upe 8”, and 31% - the partnership “Lielupe”. Changes in the social environment (number of kindergartens, baby-sitter groups etc.) have been noticed by 15% of respondents from the territory of the partnership “Kaimiņi”, 14% - “Madonas novada fonds”, 10% - the association “Pierīgas partnerība”, 18% - the association “Zied zeme”, 13% - the partnership “Upe 8”, and 15% - the partnership “Lielupe”. However, 11% of all the respondents have noticed that the infrastructure and the cultural and historical environment and its heritage have improved, but 5% have noticed that possibilities for gaining higher income have been created. Whereas 2% of them gave another answer in which they mention that organisations are now more sure to invest, that it is possible to achieve public goals, however, the others believe that the situation worsened. Only a small part – 6%
of all the respondents has not noticed any improvements. Of such respondents, 10% were from the territory of the partnership “Kaimiņi” and 1% from that of the association “Zied zeme”. The fact that 94% of all the respondents have noticed changes around them indicates that projects are implemented and LAGs perform well, but the respondents lack information on who implements these projects.

Implementation and funding of projects within the LAG strategies for 2009-2013

In Latvia, the majority of LAG project submitters who participate in implementing the LAG strategies are associations, local governments and limited liability companies, farms, and others. The surveyed project submitters pointed to key problems that arise in developing a project according to a LAG strategy are: filling in economic indicators and information in tables; defining goals of projects in relation with strategy; understanding the following terms: strategy, action, activity etc.; lack of experience.

After the analyses we can say that instead of mostly creating real jobs for young people, they are mainly engaged in voluntary work to clean up a recreational site, look after equipment, and engage others thinking the same way.

The intensity of absorption of funding is different among the LAGs in the regions; there are activities, the funding on which is spent fully, and there are ones that saved some funds. Funding of the EU Funds, co-funding of local governments, and funds of project submitters themselves are used in implementing these projects.

The largest funding was allocated to the PPP association “Zied zeme” which planned to absorb LVL 940652.73, of which 83.5% is already spent. The second largest funding was allocated to the association “Pierīgas partneriba” to implement its strategy, of which 55% was spent, while the smallest funding was allocated to the partnership “Upe 8”, and already 93% of its available funding was used up.

So far, the lowest ratio of absorbed funding relative to what is planned is observed for “Madonas novada fonds” which still has a chance to use approximately a half of allocated funds or LVL 343764.55.

Given the different sizes of LAG territories and their numbers of residents, the amounts of funds spent per capita also differ.

The territorial distribution of LAG projects is not even and perfect, and the main reasons for this problem are: a decrease in the number of residents, the lack of active residents, a large distance from the territory to its centre, no information is available to residents, the reluctance of residents to take financial liabilities and responsibly after a project is implemented, no residents having innovative and good ideas live in a certain territory.

Not all project submitters work out quality projects. The partnerships have to reject projects most often due to their incompliance with the partnerships’ strategic goals. Besides, eligible costs are also often artificially increased in these projects. Limited funding also puts constraints, and a large part of projects are rejected, as it is not enough funding for all projects. There are partnerships whose projects are rejected, as the project submitters are not able to meet the RSS requirements. Besides, project evaluators, while analysing projects, reveal self-interested project submitters. Many project submitters are not able to justify their project’s sustainability, therefore, their projects are rejected.

The proportion of administrative costs differs until 2011 and ranges form 23% to 62%.

An analysis of cost structure shows that the greatest amount of funds is spent on wages as well on maintaining infrastructure.

Three LAGs have allocated funds for publicity. The PPP “Zied zeme” that spent approximately LVL 20 per capita, while it is LVL 14.5 per capita for the rural partnership “Upe 8” and the Jelgava rural partnership “Lielupe”. Presently, the lowest ratio of absorbed funding per capita is observed for the partnership of Daugavpils and Ilūkste municipalities “Kaimiņi”.

The highest indicator, according to the information provided by LAGs and the calculation, is observed for the PPP “Zied zeme” that spent approximately LVL 20 per capita, while it is LVL 14.5 per capita for the rural partnership “Upe 8” and the Jelgava rural partnership “Lielupe”. Presently, the lowest ratio of absorbed funding per capita is observed for the partnership of Daugavpils and Ilūkste municipalities “Kaimiņi”.

The proportion of administrative costs differs until 2011 and ranges form 23% to 62%.

An analysis of cost structure shows that the greatest amount of funds is spent on wages as well on maintaining infrastructure.

Three LAGs have allocated funds for publicity. The PPP “Zied zeme” intended to conduct a study on the most urgent priorities for the next reporting period, but so far it had not been accomplished, as they faced a lack of quality services and high offer prices.

The proportion of administrative costs differs until 2011 and ranges from 23% to 62%.
The rural partnership “Upe 8” and the Jelgava rural partnership “Lielupe”, too, have allocated funds for this purpose, but the proportion of spent funds is low; the administrations plan to actively use these funds at the end of the period when a summary on what was done, implemented projects and their results is prepared.

Five LAGs have planned funds for seminars and various courses.

The LAGs point that seminars are held before announcing every tender in which project submitters are informed on necessary documents, “critical” points of already implemented projects in order for new project implementers not to make mistakes, and other important information necessary for submitting project proposals. The association “Pierīgas partnerība” believes that such seminars are not effective, therefore, it prefers visiting local governments and provides individual consultations that are more effective.

Representatives of government and, in the territory of some partnerships, project submitters, too, regularly attend seminars held by the local partnerships, participate at courses of local level, as well as make visits to other EU countries for seminars held by the local partnerships, participate at courses.

The partnerships have to inform residents of their territory and potential project submitters about their strategy, the LEADER program and the opportunities it can provide, and the way the life quality of local residents may be improved.

The LAGs have to implement more activities in which project submitters can create real jobs as well as project results enable increasing incomes.

Conclusions and recommendations
- The purpose of LEADER is to enhance the life quality of rural residents by considering both economic and social improvements and environmental preservation opportunities.
- The local development strategy of LAGs is implemented in the form of projects, and it is possible to attract financial support from measures co-financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Fisheries Fund (EFF) for its implementation in the period 2009-2013.
- The research hypothesis proved to be true only partially. The survey of residents from the six LAG territories shows that the majority of residents do not know what a LAG or a partnership is as well as are not introduced with its strategy. Part of them have never heard of it and only visual changes have noticed regarding improvements in the enhancement and clean-up of the surrounding environment and the construction of new objects for children and youth. Yet, to the majority of respondents who know what a LAG is, an action plan worked out in the strategies of LAGs seems very topical and corresponds to interests and problems of residents.
- The intensity of absorption of funding is different among the LAGs in the regions; there are activities, the funding on which is spent fully, and there are ones that saved some funds. Funding of the EU Funds, co-funding of local governments, and funds of project submitters themselves are used in implementing these projects.
- The partnerships have to inform residents of their territory and potential project submitters about their strategy, the LEADER program and the opportunities it can provide, and the way the life quality of local residents may be improved.
- The LAGs have to implement more activities in which project submitters can create real jobs as well as project results enable increasing incomes.
- To successfully implement actions, it is necessary to increase support intensity and the maximum amount of support for performers of economic activity and businessmen.

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