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THE LEADER PROGRAMME 2007-2013: REFOCUSING TOWARDS AGRICULTURE-ORIENTED ACTIVITIES AS A CONSEQUENCE OF 'MAINSTREAMING' INNOVATIVE RURAL ACTION IN AUSTRIA

Theresia Oedl-Wieser^{†‡}, Wibke Strahl[†], Thomas Dax[†]

[†]Federal Institute for Less-Favoured and Mountainous Areas,
Marxergasse 2/Mezannin, A-1030 Wien, Austria

[‡]Telephone No. ++ 431 – 504 88 69 -18, Fax No. ++ 431 – 504 88 69 -39, e-mail address:
theresia.oedl-wieser@berggebiete.at



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Abstract – Since the on-going funding period 2007-2013 the former European Community Initiative *Leader* has become a constituent part of Rural Development Policies. Above all the mainstreaming of *Leader* into the Rural Development Programme (RDP) as axis 4 has both significantly changed the level of funding and the way in which *Leader* is executed in comparison with the previous period (2000-2006). This paper discusses the impact and consequences of this mainstreaming process by the Austrian example, mainly because there are clearly concerns that the EU-wide successful *Leader* formula of bottom-up rural development will be replaced by a pronounced top-down approach in the new programme.

Key words refer to R58/R59:

Leader mainstreaming, rural development policy, area-based local strategies, innovation, multi-sectoral activities

1. Introduction

Throughout Europe rural areas are particularly important in terms of territory. Following the OECD definition for rural and intermediate areas, they represent 90% of the territory and 56% of the population in the EU-27 (EU, 2009). In Austria the share of people living in rural areas is with 75% even higher than the average of population in rural areas in the EU (BMLFUW, 2007). This specific situation has been addressed already at the end of the 1970s by establishing support programmes and pilot schemes for the less-favoured areas, particularly mountain areas. These categories comprise 81%, respectively 70% of the Austrian area. The objective was to find ways out of the so called ‘negative spiral’ – weak economic situation, out-migration to urban areas, decreasing of (social) infrastructure – especially in peripheral rural areas (Dax et al., 2009). Thus local development activities and *Leader* programming have a long tradition in Austria. They can be seen as long-term initiatives building on local development strategies which are based on the former national pilot programme of endogenous regional development – FER 1979-1999 (Gerhardter and Gruber, 2001). This long time experience underscores a series of success factors that have been taken up in *Leader* when it was installed in 1991 as one of the most famous and highly appreciated Community Initiatives of the European Union (Strahl and Dax, 2010a and Shucksmith et al., 2005).

The *Leader* programme itself is one of the Community Initiatives (established in 1991) with a specific focus on rural innovation and the task to improve quality of life at local level through a bottom-up approach. Since its beginning it focused particularly on enhancing “linkages” and participatory approaches, and raised significant interest by policy and local actors. As it became the most famous tool of local development action it spread to almost all regions of the EU and was copied by similar programme approaches beyond as well (OECD, 2006). Its main achievement was in the pro-active perspective towards nurturing potentials and addressing innovation through place-based strategies. This mirrors the understanding that innovation is not an aspatial activity, but intrinsically linked to the territory (Polenske, 2007).

Leader was an approach to working with and to building the capacity of local inhabitants and groups within their rural communities. Beyond supporting “hard” economic interventions, this includes also activities to enhance social processes, which can be considered as major driving forces to rural development (Shucksmith et al., 2005). Whereas it was seen as an experimental “pilot” scheme under *Leader* I (in the first period), *Leader* II in the following period epitomized the “laboratory” aspect, making use of the momentum to engage and spread innovative, inexperienced pathways, but was still mainly limited to disadvantaged rural areas at that time. During the period 2000-2006 it was extended to a wide range of rural regions and *Leader+* is said to have reached the maturity stage. This refers to the fact that the whole rural territory is considered as target area, and networks have taken up a central role, including transnational cooperation. With the last CAP reform *Leader* was integrated to the Rural Development Programmes (RDP) and builds a horizontal priority “axes” under which all RDP measures should be eligible. With the “mainstreaming” of the *Leader* measures, it is no longer a separate programme, but has to take up methodological tasks of integration into the RDPs (Courades,

2009). Under such a perspective Leader could be seen to require general strategic support, and increased professionalization with an enhanced financial support (ÖIR, 2004 and EC, 2006).

Although Leader was known as an innovative decentralised initiative, which generated many successful projects at local level, further improvements and shortcomings became visible for current implementation processes. Thus, for instance Leader has not reached all potential actors and interest groups of the rural society up to now. Disadvantaged groups or less involved actors, like rural women, young people or migrants, have hardly participated in the previous periods. Also the full potential of the role of farmers and the opportunities for linkages to other economic actors were addressed to a limited degree in most LAGs (Van der Ploeg, 2003). Furthermore, it has to be acknowledged that the financial support for Leader as Community Initiative was very small, compared to CAP and Structural Funds budget, implying a limited (quantitative) impact on rural development. Nevertheless, it was the first EU-wide attempt to convert the rather sector-oriented agricultural policy of RDPs into a genuinely multi-sectoral territorial approach. In conclusion, the Leader method with its seven key features¹ could be regarded as “*a buzzword for a mode of governance practiced in regional, national and multilateral development programmes*” (ÖIR, 2004).

Many times Leader was equated with a laboratory in which new ideas and strategies are searched and developed, providing a multitude of good/ bad examples of rural development under different regional contexts. Very often the richness of the experience could hardly be used and transferred to other regions due to their huge diversity and local conditions. Partly the awareness for this “learning deficit” was at the start of the mainstreaming debate. It was felt that all the time Leader has generated new solutions, designs, ideas etc. but a more general application and transfer of good practices in the context of the diversity of European rural regions was almost impossible (Van der Ploeg, 2003). Based on the above mentioned limitations, but also the integrative character and the advanced stage of development, DG Agri favoured the decision for mainstreaming the Leader programme, hoping to extend its effectiveness and success to larger parts of RDPs. In this context the EC commissioned a study to analyse the potential benefits of including the Leader approach or adopt some of its basic principles as guiding elements for future rural development measures. The conclusion was that the Leader method is applicable to the whole spectrum of rural development measures, despite considerable diversity of application of Leader measures by RDPs of EU Member States (ÖIR, 2004).

The reform should enlarge the operating field of LAG activities by extending the scope of instruments to all measures of axes 1-3 according to local needs and strategies. But mainstreaming is far from being a simple administrative change. Administrative problems arise due to programming rules and new regulation specificities that limit, in particular, the eligibility of non-agricultural activities. Furthermore, the principle of annuality of the budget is not appropriate for project-oriented funding. In some Member States political and institutional barriers could emerge, especially where decentralized management and financing through local actors is not backed up. But also problems regarding administrative obstacles related to routines of a sectoral perspective as well as large-scale payment operations occur. Moreover, the creation of local social capital which is fundamental for these activities to establish strategic and operational capacities, and to design and implement local development strategies needs a long time frame (ÖIR, 2004).

In this paper the implementation of the Leader-approach in Austria will be discussed, especially the shift from Leader+ to the Leader “priority” in the current Austrian Rural Development Programme (RDP) will be analysed as a specific case. The integration of Leader into the wider Pillar 2 delivery framework of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) might affect significantly the nature of the work of LAG according to basic features and its development potential for rural areas. This paper is aiming at a comparative analysis of Leader implementation in Austria in the former period (2000-2006) and the current one (2007-2013). It will particularly highlight the main changes due to the mainstreaming process of Leader and assess how the original characteristics of the Leader approach have been

¹ Territorial approach, Bottom-up approach, Local public-private partnership, Cooperation, Networking, Innovation, Integrated and multi-sectoral actions

affected by the new framework. Furthermore the paper discusses the communication patterns and cooperation structures among stakeholders dealing with Leader at all spatial levels.

2. Methodology

The main sources of analysis are case studies of several Austrian Leader regions carried out within the EU Framework Programme (FP7) project “Assessing the impacts of rural development policies (incl. Leader)” (RuDI; project no. 213034) and a thematic analysis on good practice within the nationally funded project “The importance of Leader in Austria – a qualitative analysis” (BF117/08). Moreover monitoring data and evaluation analysis (Resch, 2010), carried out within the mid-term evaluation of Leader 2007-2013, underpin the findings from the two research projects. Field work included a series of different methodological tools in order to get full insight and robust information about factors facilitating and hindering the implementation of innovative actions through the Leader approach. These included qualitative interviews in three Austrian provinces (Vorarlberg, Carinthia and Upper Austria) with people who carried out Leader-projects at local level, with Leader managers and with people responsible for the Leader administration at provincial and national level. Within the RuDI project case studies (in the provinces of the Tyrol, Upper and Lower Austria) were conducted and members of LAGs across the Austrian territory reported at a national Expert Workshop (Strahl and Dax, 2010b) about their experiences with mainstreaming of Leader into the RDP (face-to-face interviews and focus group meetings). The following map provides an overview on the location of Austrian Leader groups, with the respective provinces.

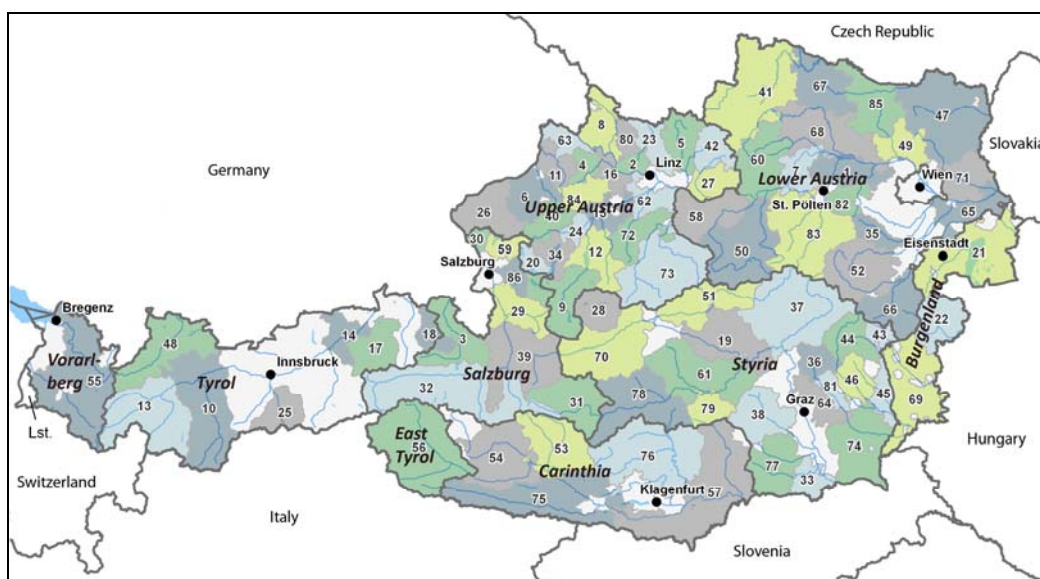


Figure 1: LAGs in Austria, 2007-2011.

Source: BMLFUW, BABF 2010

3. The evolution of Leader in Austria

“You have to learn Leader!”
(UA_LAG_2, 2)

Since Austria’s accession to the European Union in 1995, the EU Community Initiatives Leader II and Leader+ were implemented successfully and had a considerable impact on regional identity-building in many rural areas of the country. Former experiences with endogenous regional development, which have been developed since the late 1970s, proved as a good basis to build on for rural stakeholders. The Leader II period (1994-1999) started with 31 Local Action Groups (LAGs)

which were increased to 56 groups in the Leader+ period (2000-2006), covering a territory of almost 60% of all the country (Resch and Dax, 2009). From the first beginning Leader aimed at improving the development potential of rural regions by promoting local initiatives, innovations and multi-sectoral actions. Applying the bottom-up approach, which is a key feature of Leader, it was for many rural communities the first experience of cooperation and defining together priorities for developing their region.

“This was our first Leader-period and it was a big progress that people recognized that they must work together beyond the community boundary. There are strong self-interests of local politicians and business-men and it takes time that these people and other stakeholders reflect the existing potential of the whole region and not only of their own community and their businesses. An approach like ‘Leader’ is challenging the existing political and economic structures and it is one of the tasks of the Leader-manager to capture the self-interests of these people and transform them for the benefit of the region.” (UA_LAG_1, 30f)

„The most important insight was, that we need ‚regional development‘ and not only ‚community development‘, and that the big and strong communities in the centre of the region work together with the more peripheral weak ones. It ist important that they find a common theme or goal on which they can work together“ (UA_LAG_3, 24²).

Especially Leader II was a kind of laboratory for testing new ways of meeting the needs of rural communities and regions in Austria. The exchange of experiences and the transfer of the local action expertise to other rural areas was one crucial aspect among others for the expansion of Leader regions in the following period Leader+.

„Networking is very important because a lot of know-how is circulating and has been transfered to other regions. How is the situation in other regions, in other provinces? Which kind of problems do they have and how did they solve them? We have very good relationship to the LAGs in the Tyrol.“ (V_LAG_2, 17)

The Leader approach is a very complex development strategy and it needs time until the message is understood and appreciated by local stakeholders and people.

“Leader+ was somehow like a spaceship which landed in the region in 2001. This spaceship stands in St. Ä. and there is an alien – the LAG-manager – who is doing something. At the beginning you can hardly explain to people what ‘Leader’ is and what you are doing in and for the region. But when the first projects are implemented in the region people recognize and feel what Leader is.” (UA_LAG_2, 15)

The main areas of investment in Leader+ (2000-2006) were tourism/ leisure (34%), culture (15%) as well as processing of agricultural products (14%). Other project priorities were located in business and trade, cultural landscape, village renewal, innovation, renewable energy, new information and communication technologies, qualification and social projects, denoting the wide range of non-agricultural activities applied through that programme. These areas of investment and action also reflect the diversity of rural regions in Austria (Resch and Dax, 2009 and Fidlshuster, 2007). In Leader+ there was in many cases room for experiments and pilot projects also for cooperation between the different economic sectors in rural areas.

The impacts of mainstreaming of Leader (2007-2013) in Austria

In the current programme period (2007-2013) Leader shifted to another level, being integrated as a priority instrument to the Rural Development Programms (RDP). Nevertheless it was conceived that the Leader approach in this new context contributes to *“the territorial coherence and synergies (...to) be reinforced for the broader rural economy and population [...]*” (Courades, 2009). This highlights the close reference to territorial cohesion and calls for coherence with Regional Policy programmes. However, since Leader is mainstreamed, extensive changes occurred in terms of the application of the

² UA: Upper Austria; V: Vorarlberg; LAG: Local Action Group

Leader programme. The most visible is its integration into the RDP as axis 4 and consequently the Leader measures have to be implemented by the same procedures and fulfill requirements as for the other RDP measures. In Austria the allocation is done, as in most European countries, for the 4 axes, with a minimum of 5% for the Leader axis³. Based on the allocation of EU funding per axes the financial support for the Leader programme was increased. In Austria the current indicative budget is € 423.5 m. of public funds against € 178.8 m. in the previous period (BMLFUW, 2007). This considerable financial increase should realize a corresponding impact in the outcome and policy performance for rural areas of Austria.

Implementation of the Leader measures takes place in the selected 86 Leader regions by LAGs which cover almost the whole territory (actually 92% of the total area, accommodating almost 4.3 m. people). The responsible authority for Leader measures as an integral component of the RDP 2007-2013 is the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management (BMLFUW). The national Strategy and RDP, which refers to the EU Strategic Guidelines, has made available all RDP measures of axes 1 to 3 to be applied by LAGs within the Leader scheme. Beyond the coordination role at the national level, the provinces (Länder) have the core task of administrating the implementation and constitute service institutions as well. Their responsibility is to assess the content of Leader project applications, decide about the approval of projects and to distribute (Leader) funds to the applicants. The implementation procedures are however different from province to provinces. This starts with the support institutions: Some Leader managers are attached to and some are themselves “regionalmanagers” at the same time and hence operate also with other programmes such as INTERREG, RCP (Regional Competitiveness Programme financed by ERDF) and national regional support programmes. This is the case for instance in the Tyrol in the western part of Austria where the Leader management is in charge of the project administration and implementation, support and assistance and also the contact point for the rural applicants and linkage to the provincial level. Furthermore, the LAGs are responsible for data collection, monitoring and self-evaluation tasks and have to create the local development strategy for their regions for the duration of the whole programming period.

The Austrian RDP is oriented at fulfilling the minimum funding level of 5% for the Leader axis. The paying agency is the Agrarmarkt Austria (AMA), which transfers annually the Leader budget to the provincial funding service points, which allocate funds to the project applicants of their LAGs (Strahl and Dax, 2010a). Beyond that, the most important changes regarding the delivery of Leader mainstreaming have occurred in relation to administrative regulations and consequences of its application. Thus, the current implementation of Leader measures is characterized by two diverse types of Leader projects: “classical” and “standard” ones, with their operation varying strongly from province to province. Classical projects are typical Leader projects as known from previous periods with consideration of the original principles. The “standard projects” have arisen under the mainstreaming approach and are primarily projects dealing with restoring forestry potential (M 226), agricultural roads construction (M 321), biomass plants (M 311, M 321), modernization of agricultural holdings (M 121), forestry roads (M 125) or encouragement of tourism activities (M 313). The following figure 2 provides an overview on the project allocation to Leader measures and confirms coincidentally an increase of standard projects within the primary sector.

³ EU-countries with the highest percentage of Axis 4 in the RDPs: Spain (11.3%), Portugal (10.1%), Netherlands (9.9%), Estonia (9.6%) (EU, 2009)

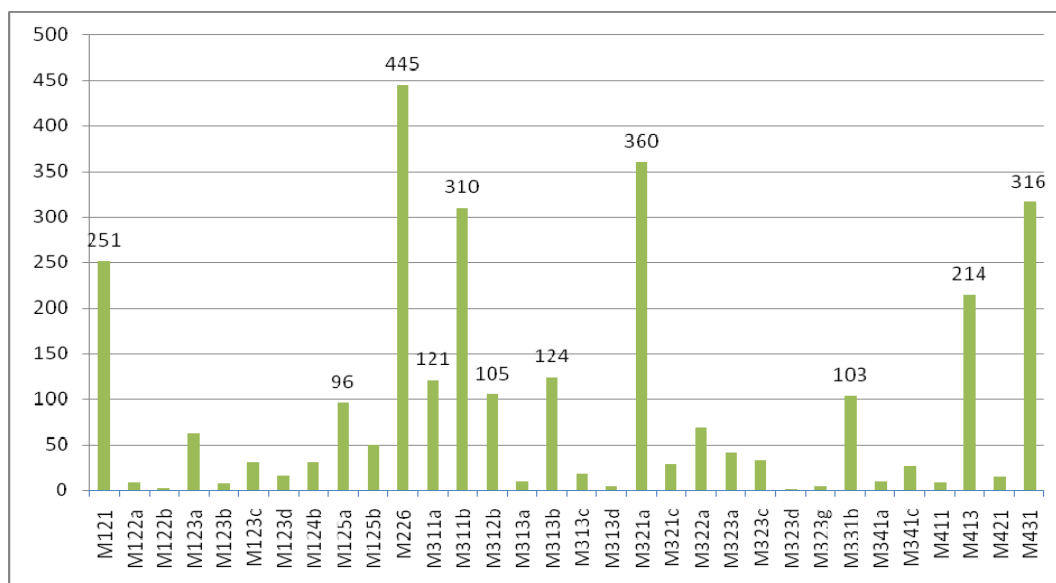


Figure 2: Numbers of projects allocated to measures, 2007-2009

Source: BABF 2010

The standard character of the project type allows a shortened and simplified procedure of project approval. Thus, a procedure of “circular resolution” has been established by many provinces to save valuable time for preparation and professional supporting of creative and more demanding “classical” projects for the LAG management. The standard agricultural projects are distributed via email to members of the Leader committee for (tacit) approval within a short period (1-2 weeks). In other words the decision-making bodies “rubber-stamp” such projects (Strahl and Dax, 2010a). Despite the administrative advantages of these procedures, there is rising concern about the legitimacy of this approach and the shift of decision-taking power from the local to the higher levels.

Moreover, these “formal” changes included substantial changes in Leader contents and delivery which have also emerged due to the new RDP structure. Thus, Leader projects can only be funded if budget provision for measure codes has been set. Therefore, gender or social projects often cannot be taken into account because generally there has no appropriate funding source been prepared. With the exception of the provinces of the Tyrol and Vorarlberg in the western part of Austria, where an “additional” funding base is foreseen for typical Leader projects which are not allocated to any of the measures of priorities 1-3. This underpins the feeling of many actors that the tripling of the Leader budget in the 2007-13 programming period so far had no effect on raising potential for local initiatives. This partly is due to the double assignment of projects that is applied in Austria in order to accomplish the minimal 5% threshold for the Leader axis. Technically that means that one project is accounted to a measure of priority 1-3 and, simultaneously to the measure code of the Leader axis (Wiesinger and Dax, 2008). At the provincial level the co-funding agencies have elaborated specific directives and allocated tasks to various internal funding bodies dealing with specific measures eligible for funding as Leader projects. In the Austrian provinces there is *not* one specified Leader funding office, but applications have to be submitted to various institutions, according to the project’s theme. Primarily, there are funding Offices of agriculture, nature protection or tourism. Project ideas in the domain of social development, gender equality, cultural activities and integration issues have difficulties to find appropriate funding institutions (Oedl-Wieser, 2010). Leader projects have to address the specific topics to get funds from these co-funding agencies, whereby often original project ideas cannot be realized. Furthermore, the procedure of project application up to approval is often very time-consuming, as applications are repeatedly sent back and forth between the agencies responsible. This leads consequently to a lack of appropriate match-funding and delays in the Leader implementation (Strahl and Dax, 2010a).

What becomes obvious is that the innovative character as the core success factor of Leader is threatened by this “banalisation” of projects. With the shift to low-risk agricultural “standard” projects the orientation towards activities of an experimental character with a high degree of creativity and innovation is diminishing. It is up to all levels to counter-balance this tendency and take efforts to re-establish the pre-conditions for local community action. The economic crisis contributed to a perception where matching budgetary targets prevails over local community development needs. In this situation the Leader managers have become more careful in the initiation of innovative projects because in reality these are often not feasible within the current regulatory framework. But this had previously been a significant hallmark of what was distinctive about the Leader approach (Strahl et al., 2010).

4. Conclusions

With the mainstreaming of Leader the spectrum of the eligible activities, which can be financed by Leader, has significantly expanded, but an experimental and innovative project orientation is no longer a compelling eligibility condition. That means Leader is now also open for classical investment-measures without a specific innovative focus. Thus, the character of projects which are funded by Leader has changed in comparison to previous programmes. With Leader as mainstreaming programme a significant number of standard (agricultural) projects are supported and currently make up the bulk of projects in almost all regions. This has implications for the administration requirements and leaves the question open where to find additional resources for innovative, more time-consuming activities. Although Leader receives three times more financial support than in the previous period, there are no additional RDP effects to be expected (as for instance regional economic growth) because of the fact that Leader is becoming increasingly an implementation tool for agricultural oriented projects. Moreover, based on the financial minimum appropriation for potential Leader projects and additional provincial implementation rules, in general a lot of innovative project ideas are not eligible any more although they could contribute to the increased regional added value.

In the current period Leader is characterized by the conflict between administration and innovation. Thus, the administration seeks an effective implementation and transparent use of resources of the programme. Consequently, there is little room for innovation, which would be linked to the pursuit of “unpaved pathways” and connected to qualitative aspects as experiences and the disposition to take risks. All this is in sharp contrast with formal implementation regulations. Leader is confronted with an increasingly high pressure from agriculture, which restricts the flexibility of the programme. Thus, it has turned to a sector programme among other RDP measures available at the regional level. Innovative proposals would be passed on to other regional funding institutions. A specific role of the programme for rural action cannot be discerned any more. There is also increasing concern about parallel regional structures and competences which are best visible in overlaps with regard to project/measure implementation at the regional and provincial level. For instance, this makes daily work of Leader managers quite complicated as the attribution of projects to the correct programmes gets central attention, and not its contents and degree of innovativeness. Nevertheless, the continuing success of Leader will depend on the engagement of local and regional inhabitants, which is the only way to overcome the emerging internal doubts on the Leader future.

Mainstreaming has particularly changed the roles of actors at different levels. Whereas Leader was famous for its bottom-up approach, LAGs nowadays feel constrained and squeezed in between a growing set of regulations, losing sight of its strategy to make use of the specific rural assets through an innovative approach. This is experienced by the majority of LAGs as they have lost a degree of their autonomy and discretion to make decision on the basis of their local knowledge. Mainstreaming due to the RDP structure and operating rules has also made it more difficult for the operating local level to act flexible and to respond to the particular needs of local areas or to be a ‘test bed’ for endogenous rural development actions that may not always be certain to succeed but that hitherto have been considered worth trying. The initial intention by the EU to use the Leader approach for introducing innovation in axis 1-3 for achieving better governance at the local level and encouraging an endogenous rural development could not be realized under mainstreaming, at least in this case

(Resch 2010, 25; Strahl and Dax 2010a), but obviously failed in many other countries as well (Strahl et al., 2010 and RuDI - Extended Policy Brief, 2010).

In this period the Leader measures are increasingly in contradiction to the bottom-up-approach (one of its 7 key features) so that it is not surprising that there is concern that the Leader ethos of bottom-up rural development is being replaced by a much more top-down reality. In this respect, the principles of innovative, area-based local strategies as guiding the Leader programme are in danger of becoming buzzwords without actual relevance. It should be recalled that the debate on Leader mainstreaming recognized quite explicitly that the Leader methodology would also have to be applied to the measures of the other axes of RDPs.

The limited policy effects resulting from programme changes related to Leader mainstreaming are due to the weak *strategic* support for integrating Leader into the RDP. This implies in particular a lack of strategy as to how to implement such a large share of innovative action across the Austrian LAGs. As the easiest way to cope with the administrative challenge of spending a much higher budget on Leader projects was through including “traditional” agricultural projects under the Leader axis, this approach has been adopted by most provinces, according to the specific institutional contexts. As an effect Leader is “squeezed” in between high expectations of local innovation and a neglect of strategic concern, which is aggravated by a considerably high administrative burden. Therefore the main conclusions can be summarized by the following aspects:

- Leader should be conceived so that it is able to regain its character of a laboratory for innovative interrelation of multi-sector activities enhancing experiments for new linkages.
- Strategies of local actors have to be placed in the centre of the development strategies and constitute the building blocks for the RDPs.
- Mainstreaming implies an enhanced commitment for raising community capacity and a persistent orientation and support of cooperation and local development.
- A stricter linkage of funds to bottom-up approaches (by EC regulations) could support the influence on the use of mainstreaming by local institutions and increase programme effectiveness, and local and regional performance.
- Leader projects should not any longer be linked to, and thus restricted by measure codes so that the programmes original diversity could be preserved, and also projects on culture and social issues are eligible, for which measure codes are not available.

Good practice in Leader mainstreaming will be required to take effective use of wide-spread interesting experiences and improve again Leader’s setting in the rural contexts.

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