Thomas DAX* and Theresia OEDL-WIESER*

Rural innovation activities as a means for changing development perspectives – An assessment of more than two decades of promoting LEADER initiatives across the European Union

Since the 1990s the LEADER approach has very powerfully addressed the spirit of mobilising actors in the countryside through focusing on endogenous potential and activating local stakeholders across all sectors. Given the long-term experience and wealth of diverse development initiatives across the European Union (EU), the diversity of implementation is huge. Considering the limited financial support as a Community Initiative (until 2006), a significant extension and 'upgrading' of LEADER was intended by integrating it into the EU Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) since 2007. The shift from the character of a 'pilot' instrument at the start of LEADER to its 'mainstreaming' into the RDPs involved radical administrative changes and high expectations of increased impacts. The interest in LEADER practice and effectiveness led to many studies that in general apply a limited perspective of self-evaluation and reflection on LEADER activities. Its main impact is seen in providing learning processes in rural regions and the effects on changes in local governance through extended involvement of local stakeholders and institutions. This paper provides a synthesis of European experiences and analyses of core changes, in particular by referring to the example of implementation in the Austrian context. The main lessons are based on the reflection of obstacles and promoting factors of implementation during the last 25 years against the LEADER principles. The limitations in the assessment of LEADER call for a systemic approach that includes interrelations to a much wider degree. LEADER's legacy is seen well beyond a quantitative measurement, but has to be found in its influence on actors' perspectives, new pathways and strategies for rural development[1].

Keywords: rural development, LEADER, social innovation, participation, policy assessment, Austria

* Bundesanstalt für Bergbauernfragen, Marxergasse 2, A-1030 Wien, Austria. Corresponding author: thomas.dax@berggebiete.at

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, rural development has emerged as an important European policy field. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the Cohesion Policy can be seen as the base of origin of the European Union's (EU) Rural Development Policy (Kull, 2014). The emergence of rural policy can only be understood through the increasing changes and societal challenges extending by and by to all rural areas. Despite a strong and persistent reliance on traditional views and sector approaches linking the 'rural' tightly with the land use base, conceptual shifts have to be acknowledged (Copus and Dax, 2010). Increasingly, tendencies of diversification of economic activities as the main driving force for rural and regional development, an enhanced focus on modernisation and innovation, the recognition of the significant role of entrepreneurial activities and the widespread attention for the valorisation of local specificities are crucial elements in shaping the rural territory, indicate the change of the state of the art for analysing rural development. Yet, Rural Development Policy practice, as defined by EC regulations and understood by most involved stakeholders, hardly goes beyond land use issues (Dax, 2015).

However, the rhetoric on rural development largely visible since the late 1980s (cf. CEC, 1988) was a strong incentive for local action in rural areas. Given the institutional gaps and prevailing sector policy implementation, at that time only a 'Community Initiative' by the European Commission (EC) itself seemed capable to establish a new policy approach, encompassing the wide set of emerging policy needs. As a result, the concept of the LEADER approach has been successful in mobilising endogenous resources and in addressing local development opportunities in rural regions (Shucksmith, 2010). The bottom-up principle is one of the most relevant aspects of LEADER, aiming at social capital building and enhancing (social) innovation in rural areas. Since its beginning, it focused particularly on enhancing 'linkages' and participatory approaches, and raised significant interest by policy and local actors. Based on the insight that local activities initiated by LEADER since its establishment in 1991 have brought substantial momentum to rural regions across the EU, a widespread application of the concept aimed in recent years to enhance regional performance which cumulated in the mainstreaming of LEADER (Dax *et al*., 2016).

Whereas it was seen as an experimental 'pilot' scheme under LEADER I (in the period 1991-1993), LEADER II in the period 1994-1999 epitomised the 'laboratory' aspect, making use of the desire to engage and spread innovative, inexperienced pathways. However, it was still mainly oriented towards disadvantaged rural areas at that time. During the LEADER+ period (2000-2006) it was extended to a wide range of rural regions and it is said that LEADER reached maturity at that time. This refers to the fact that the whole rural territory is considered as the target area, and networks have taken up a central role, including transnational cooperation. Both aspects underpin the remit of the concept to address all rural areas and to provide substantial impact on rural economic and social development. With the CAP reform for the period 2007-2013, LEADER was formally integrated into the Rural Development Programmes (RDP) and, conceived as a horizontal priority scheme, all RDP measures became eligible for LEADER funding (EC, 2006).

The shift from a sectoral to a territorial rural development strategy in rural areas has focused attention on neo-endogenous strategies as a means of fostering rural develop-

[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Fifth EUGEO Congress on the Geography of Europe, 30 August – 2 September 2015 in Budapest. The paper benefits from discussion following the presentation and subsequent peer review.

ment. Innovation within LEADER has involved economic initiatives but in particular shared learning processes and the mutual exchange of knowledge and ideas should be enhanced (Bock, 2012; Dax *et al*., 2016). Furthermore, the territorial orientation of LEADER is manifested by the concern for small-regional and local scales and the promotion and development of new forms of organisation at both an institutional and personal level, which result in social changes beneficial to the communities involved (Cawley, 2009; Neumeier, 2012). As such, the notion of social innovation is widely recognised as of central importance to the aims of LEADER. Social innovation is not an aspatial activity, but is therefore intrinsically linked to territory.

The high potential recognised in the LEADER approach led to a further extension of the scope of application through enabling Multi-Fund Local Development Programmes through Community Led Local Development (CLLD) to be implemented for the funding period 2014-2020. Funds for LEADER projects will amount to EUR 6.7 billion for this period, but an ex-ante assessment reveals only very limited use of the CLLD approach (Kantor, 2015).

On account of this long experience the present paper draws on the wide scope of implementation practices of the LEADER approach and assesses its implications on rural and social changes. By referring to the long-term discourse on LEADER as the main territorial instrument of 'rural development', an important question is whether its implementation could take sufficient account of rural development needs, enhance social innovation and achieve substantial impacts for rural change. The paper outlines the specific implementation practices of the LEADER approach in the EU, by highlighting its significance in the Austrian context. Firstly the background and key aspects of the concept are introduced, and its general characteristics as well as obstacles and promoting factors of implementation during the different programming periods in the last 25 years are analysed. As the application of LEADER is programme specific, the analysis of the Austrian programme will serve as a useful example to address programme evolution up to the present stage. The most recent programme adaptations are analysed to provide an overview how the turn from 'mainstreaming LEADER' to CLLD was managed and which new requirements and incentives were taken into consideration. This is followed by a review of the LEADER practice that argues that many available studies apply a limited perspective of self-evaluation and reflection on LEADER activities. Against the weaknesses of quantitative results, LEADER's main impact is seen in providing learning processes in rural regions.

The conclusions then focus on the questions about LEADER's legacy and perspectives for rural development.

The idea of the LEADER approach

The LEADER programme was established as one of the Community Initiatives (in 1991) with the specific task of enhancing innovation and quality of life in rural areas. The core idea strived to provide scope for innovative actions within rural areas, thereby responding to the increasingly visible development needs and the efforts to raise trans-sectoral activities (Dargan and Shucksmith, 2008). 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 (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; Bock, 2012; Neumeier, 2012).

The LEADER principles[2] emphasise the area-based concept and look for the most effective use of local resources and assets in order to enhance the regional identity of the rural residents (EC, 2006). LEADER is an instrument for working with and for building the capacity of local residents and groups within their rural communities. Beyond supporting 'hard' economic interventions, it is its commitment to include activities to enhance social processes, considered as major driving forces to rural development (Dax *et al*., 2016). The 'experimental' character of LEADER was important at the beginning, and later on attention shifted towards action for innovative, inexperienced pathways, still mainly limited to disadvantaged rural areas. As the concept of LEADER was seen as attractive and the most clear expression of a 'territorial focus' of the CAP, its integration into the RDPs in the period 2007-2013 was thought of as extending the scope and effectiveness of rural development considerably.

Although LEADER was known as an innovative decentralised initiative which generated many successful projects at local level, further needs for improvements and shortcomings became visible in the implementation process. Thus, LEADER has not reached all potential actors and interest groups (Shortall, 2008), leaving scope for inclusion of disadvantaged groups or less involved actors, such as rural women, young people or migrants. 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 Local Action Groups (LAG) (Oedl-Wieser, 2010; Thuessen, 2010; Furmankiewicz, 2012, Granberg *et al*., 2015). Furthermore, it has to be acknowledged that the financial support for LEADER as a Community Initiative was very small, compared to the CAP and Structural Funds budgets, implying a limited (quantitative) impact on rural development. It therefore was sometimes seen as "a buzzword for a mode of governance practiced in regional, national and multilateral development programmes" (ÖIR, 2004, p.3) lacking sufficient effectiveness for the involved territories. Partly the reference to its pilot and laboratory character also led to a very context-specific experience and implementation practice. Overall assessment remained very mixed and 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 and ideas but a more general application and transfer

[2] From the start of the LEADER Community Initiative in 1991 the key features were: bottom-up approach; participation in decision-making and creating local development strategies; public-private partnerships; inter-territorial cooperation and networks; integrated trans-sectoral actions; promotion of innovation; and economic diversification.

of good practices in the context of the diversity of European rural regions was almost impossible (Van der Ploeg, 2003; ÖIR, 2004).

From pilot action to 'mainstreaming'

Based on the above-mentioned limitations, but also the integrative character and the advanced stage of development, DG AGRI opted to mainstream the LEADER programme, hoping to extend its effectiveness and success to larger parts of RDPs. A study to analyse the potential benefits of including the LEADER approach into RDPs (ÖIR, 2004), commissioned by the EC, supported the view that the LEADER method is applicable to the whole spectrum of rural development measures, despite considerable diversity between Member States (RuDI, 2010).

The reform should enlarge the operating field of LAG activities by extending the scope of instruments to all RDP measures according to local needs and strategies. But the mainstreaming of LEADER was far from being a simple administrative change. Administrative problems arose 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 decentralised 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 that is fundamental for these activities to establish strategic and operational capacities, and to design and implement local development strategies needs a long time frame.

In the 2007-2013 programming period LEADER was conceived to contribute to "the territorial coherence and synergies between measures intended for the broader rural economy and population" (EC, 2005, para. 48). This highlights the close reference to territorial cohesion and calls for coherence with Regional Policy programmes. However, assessment of practical implementation of mainstreaming falls short of those objectives (Papadopoulou *et al*., 2011; Dax *et al*., 2016; Navarro *et al*., 2015).

A main background was that the requirement to fulfil the minimum funding level of 5 per cent of EAFRD funding for the LEADER budget was an extension of the financial means of about three to five times. For Austria it meant that public support for LEADER measures increased from EUR 110 million in 2000-2006 to EUR 499 million in 2007-2013. As this over-stretched, at least in part, funding capacities and particularly the potential to prepare innovative action, the LEADER budget was largely used for other RDP measures, mainly from the part targeted at diversification and 'quality of life' measures (termed as Axis III within 2007-2013 RDPs). Moreover, these 'formal' changes included substantial changes in LEADER contents, delivery and strategy implications. As 'horizontal' application was the main approach of most LAG work plans, the specificity of contexts and local strategies waned. Experimental and innovative project orientation was no longer a compelling eligibility condition. Discussions where to find additional resources for innovative, more time-consuming activities and how to realise such ideas gained specific significance. Particularly, motivated actors interested in the network aspect and reflexive concerns of LEADER started to question the outcome on local development. In particular, they highlighted flaws on cross-sectoral effects, socio-economic changes and large-scale effects on improving situations for regions with negative population trends and weak economic performance. It is thus an issue if attractiveness of rural areas could be increased by LEADER activities or how perspectives on regional development are changing over the long term.

Case-specific assessment studies in Austria (Dax *et al.*, 2016), for other countries (Papadopoulou *et al.*, 2011; Pollermann *et al.*, 2013; Le Roy and Vollet, 2013; Navarro *et al*., 2015) and more general EU-wide assessment (RuDI, 2010) suggest limited policy effects resulting from programme changes related to LEADER mainstreaming. These are due to the weak strategic support for integrating LEADER into the RDPs. It implies in particular a lack of strategy as to how to implement such a large share of innovative action across the 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 in Austria, 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 very high administrative burden.

Towards integrating social innovation in Local Development Strategies

The circumstance that LEADER has not reached sufficiently all potential actors and interest groups and the disappointing outcome in the 'mainstreaming' period 2007-2013 (Dax *et al*., 2016) led to an intensive reorientation towards integrative local development in the EU regulations (the CLLD approach) and in the programming process of LEADER for the 2014-2020 RDP of Austria.

For a deeper understanding of how comprehensive and integrative gender equality and social diversity issues are considered, the SWOT analysis of the 77 LDSs of Austria were analysed during the selection process of LAGs. The main points of interest were the assessment of local assets and the inclusion of needs and potentials of disadvantaged social groups in the proposed strategies. Despite the strong evidence that gender equality and social diversity boost sustainable economic growth in rural areas, all social issues are still subordinate to economic interests in the SWOT analysis. Nevertheless the analysis observes the starting recognition of diversity and equality aspects for local development. A more pronounced awareness of local actors, stakeholders and programme developers for the potentials and problems of women and other social groups, and the significance of 'equal chances' for all groups of society can help to transform the destructive views in still prevalent gender-role models and to overcome the restricted understanding of benefits of social diversity in rural regions (Oedl-Wieser, 2016).

Table 1: Relevance and priorities of different social groups and themes in the SWOT analysis of Austrian LAGs (2014-2020).

Category	Relevance	SWOT aspect (per cent)			
		S	W	O	T
Women	216	15.3	47.2	21.8	15.7
Youth	206	18.0	51.0	14.5	16.5
Elderly	56	14.3	39.3	30.4	16.0
Migrants	82	6.1	40.2	22.0	31.7
Disabled persons	51	11.8	58.8	23.5	5.9
Demographic change	121	4.1	24.0	7.4	64.5
Social infrastructure	179	15.6	51.4	22.4	10.6
Participation	134	47.8	23.9	12.7	15.6

Relevance calculated as number of mentions in all SWOT dimensions for all 77 LAGs; SWOT aspect shows the percentage of each SWOT aspect out of all items of the respective category
Source: SWOT analysis of Austrian LAGs 2015; own calculation

The SWOT analysis was carried out[3] by applying the methodology of quantitative content analysis (Kromrey, 2009). For this purpose, eight categories were formulated – five concerning groups of disadvantaged people (women, youth, elderly people, migrants, disabled persons) and three targeted at thematic issues (demographic change, social infrastructure, participation) – and all relevant SWOT statements were attributed to these categories. While the latter ones are understood to address implementation aspects of gender equality and social diversity, the other five categories show the relevance for the different social groups. Table 1 summarises the statements of the regional SWOTs (with separate notes on their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) and provides a simple measurement of how frequently these categories have been addressed. Of course, this is not a qualitative assessment of the contents and relevance of these groups for the strategies. In the second data column, however, the predominant aspect is highlighted, thus indicating in which of the four dimensions of the SWOT analysis LAGs detect highest relevance for each of the categories.

The analysis of the LDS selection process and of SWOTs presented underpins an increased concern for gender, diversity and, more generally, social issues. This can be interpreted partly as reaction to the programme requirements since national call information and selection rules particularly urged inclusion of these perspectives. The majority of the 77 selected Austrian LAGs thus placed specific concern on presenting weaknesses and threats of these specific groups as input to the LDS discussion (Table 1). For women, young people and disabled persons the local actors could mainly see weaknesses, and with regard to future demographic development, threats were highlighted. However, for a small subset of LAGs the opportunities of integration and inclusion activities of elderly people and migrants are clearly visible. The same applies to the aspect of participation, even to a higher degree, where important strengths through enhancing relevant procedures and activating schemes were highlighted as a specific strength of the LDSs.

This confirms the hypothesis that social capital in the LAGs will be strengthened through extending LAGs and local action to new stakeholder groups including disadvantaged social groups (Nardone *et al*., 2009). The awareness for the problems and needs for disadvantaged groups has risen substantially in the LAGs compared to the previous funding periods. It will be seen in the future to what extent the LAGs will actually address the issues of gender equality, social diversity and increased involvement when implementing their LDSs. It has to be seen whether the recent changes are appropriate to make use of the potential of the LEADER approach that was valued even higher in the discourse of EU policy reform.

The need for a critical assessment: valuing LEADER's practice

The complexity of any development approach and social interventions, which are the core constituents of rural development concepts, are reflected by research and evaluation in various case studies. The results of studies targeted at evaluation issues of rural development (RuDI, 2010) and internal EC assessment underpin the high relevance of LEADER activities for rural development. The experiences of EU Member States summarised in targeted conferences (e.g. preparation conferences for the current programme period), stock-taking exercises (Lukesch and Schuh, 2007) and comparative working groups for LEADER preparation and implementation support (e.g. European Network for Rural Development working groups and discussions at national level) point to the extension of evaluation considerations – from primarily quantitative to mixed approaches, where qualitative and participative tools are integrated increasingly (Pollermann *et al*., 2013). This reflects a stronger focus on communicating evaluation potential and the need for a stronger involvement of local actors in the evaluation process. Local experiences may be seen as expressions of reflective agency and an important ingredient of learning processes in a given social context (Dax *et al*., 2014).

The predominant discussion of assessing the impact of LEADER's effectiveness is dominated by particular attention for good practice and implementation observation following programme evaluations. Its focus is on research questions, highlighting a specific concern for learning processes, with a perspective of enabling rural development. The framing of the discussion is largely derived from internal assessment of satisfaction and evaluation of LAGs perspectives on how they interpret the achievements of programme outcome. Although such an approach openly captures the viewpoint of local active people, it is a highly demanding exercise, requiring reflexivity and the capability of self-evaluation to a high extent. Local actors have partly engaged in such activities, yet are often invited to do so when effects of the implementation are to be deployed. The process involved so far remained largely facultative (Baumfeld and Fidlschuster, 2007), but whenever available the outcome of increased reflexive agency has been appreciated as a step towards LEADER's original remit (Nemes *et al*., 2014).

A comprehensive valuation of LEADER's achievements has to go well beyond good practice collection or reference to stakeholder satisfaction. In a previous analytical reflection

[3] One of the authors (TOW) was member in the Selection Committee for LAGs in Austria and prepared the classification of SWOTs into categories addressing different social groups.

of appropriate rural development evaluation the following main aspects were highlighted as crucial (Dax *et al*., 2014): enhancing social innovation and empowerment; participation in rural development; responding to rural needs; enabling the process of empowerment; and focus on programme impact. In particular the last aspect deceives further in-depth exploration with regard to this paper, focusing on the long-term changes and achievements of LEADER for shaping rural development perspectives. A critical assessment of the programme's outcome is not bound by its own 'system borders'. Such a wider view is particularly valid as the recent regional development discourse has highlighted two major conceptual advances relevant for rural development; i.e. the 'relational turn' of spatial dynamics (Copus and de Lima, 2015) and the new concern of 'proximity' research (Torre and Wallet, 2014). Both concepts stress the increasing interrelation of spatial development and actors as well as the 'non-Euclidian' nature of these relationships. In essence, this means that closeness cannot always be captured through physical terms, but often relates to a concept of non-physical exchange and interrelation over longer distances.

This implies also fundamental changes in the approach to assessing outcomes of programme application. In particular, assessment should start with an identification of the intended result, i.e. a concentration on the programme focus. This is radically different from an approach where the allocation of resources is decided at the start of the programming process and a method to assess effectiveness is derived afterwards. In particular, such a shift would also increase transparency on the result indicator. The core target is to value LEADER's practice and its implications on activities of local actors and rural regions. This approach points to alternatives in the evaluation concept that go well beyond the current situation. However, indicators alone cannot tell the whole story and in this regard it is unavoidable to draw on the context of policy design, institutional setting and various additional forces impacting on rural development.

Realising LEADER's visions

Policy adjustment in the EU Member States is largely referred to by programme uptake. The evaluation logic of linear cause-effect relationships that prevailed for a long period is no longer accepted as an adequate framework for complex local development patterns like those addressed by the LEADER concept. An inherent bias of quantitative indicators towards measurable and less innovative action that hardly pays attention to the influences of interrelations, power relationships (Shucksmith, 2010) and upsetting discussions with different views and procedures is still often characteristic for programme evaluation. The affirmative role of evaluation therefore directly responds to its prevalent function of accountability.

As policy development is subject to forces of inertia (Dax, 2015) the application of the LEADER concept has to be viewed through a slow adaptation of both the institutional framework, and in terms of the knowledge and relevant expertise as well as involvement of individual local actors. The multitude of good practice examples taking stock of respective region-specific action at different stages of the various implementation periods (e.g. EC 2007; Saraceno, 2007; EC, 2008a; EC, 2008b; EC, 2009; ENRD, 2011; ENRD, 2012) provide extensive and detailed evidence of different aspects of 'rural innovation'. However, it would be improper to underestimate the controversial effects of the governance systems of the 28 Member States for enabling innovative local development.

LEADER's vision is associated with a long-term perspective, indicating the changing nature of local development action that has to cope with inherent inertia of policy adaptation processes. In this regard controversial views of involved stakeholders, various actors and observers and groups affected by LEADER action are dealing with following main issues:

- *Learning processes* are addressed as one of the main effects of LEADER and relevant for all people involved in the programme process and in developing projects (project holders, LAG members, LAG managers, NGOs, administration etc.);
- Implementation of *cross-sectoral projects* faces many difficulties, including securing mutual understanding in cooperation, adjusting to diverse administration regimes, co-financing and available complementary financial resources, outcome, monitoring and controls etc.;
- *Overlaps of responsibilities* of new institutions and programme structures in rural development (Scott, 2004) is often a persisting problem;
- *Institutional learning* as iterative process in administration of provinces and at federal level is weakly developed, and subject to challenges of 'efficiency' of bureaucratic work;
- Exposure to *new social trends* and influences question traditional 'local identity' and requires an enhanced answer in positioning the LEADER region.

The host of questions arising from these aspects indicates the process nature of LEADER implementation and the great diversity of regional developments. The application of LEADER in almost all rural regions of the EU underpins its territorial scope and outreach on the relevant spaces. The mere coverage of the rural area, however, does not represent any proof of its effectiveness and implications on the rural society. Nevertheless, from a series of case studies in many EU Member States it can be concluded that internal processes, regional perspectives and socio-economic activities have evolved. As there is no conclusive study available that reports on the overall effects of LEADER on EU's rural regions[4], any respective assessment has to refer to network exchanges and case study reports. Professionalisation of the regional development activities and increased external valuation of the regional changes is highlighted for example in LAG Steirisches Vulkanland (2015), showing how local assets could be used and extended through LEADER application. This LAG effectively elaborated initiatives in diverse economic and social fields, enhanced quality products and regional branding, and is famous of a (new) regional iden-

[4] One draft of the Work Programme for the Horizon 2020 Framework Programme had proposed such a European study but unfortunately dropped the topic in the approval process.

tity. Another example is the LEADER project 'Kraft. Das Murtal' (regional economic development in Obersteiermark) which represents a strong trans-sectoral cooperation between 68 companies of the rural region, schools, pupils and students, and achieves tightening of links for young people to their region. Within this alliance the young people get useful information about qualification needs and job opportunities in the region. A further example for the integrative approach of LEADER is the project 'Promotion of intercultural competence' where different stakeholders and NGOs in a LAG in Oberösterreich established a training programme and a series of activities for enhancing the intercultural competence in rural areas (Fidlschuster *et al*., 2015).

Quite often such interesting examples of regional development are useful as good practice and serve as role model for other areas. It should be noted that the improved communication and networking has brought about inspiration for an increasing amount and scope of project initiatives in contexts which were doomed to marginalisation and decay before that. In particular, cooperation across borders, including cooperation of municipalities remains a significant challenge, but includes substantial opportunities when managed and facilitated in an engaged and effective manner (Pfefferkorn *et al*., 2010).

It is this exchange of experience that was at the origin of the LEADER concept (and indicated by the first letter of the abbreviation). However, this is the part that is still only weakly developed and deserves more attention (Marquardt *et al*., 2012). Again, the example of the above-mentioned LAG Steirisches Vulkanland indicates the potential for trans-national cooperation and the changes acquired through international cooperation activities (Kah, 2015).

Conclusions

LEADER is referred to as the territorial instrument of the RDPs and many expectations are linked to it. As a local development initiative it was introduced in the EU, first in 1991 as a Community Initiative and later integrated into RDPs, while it recently changed toward the more general framework of CLLDs. These shifts in the institutional framework and at the same time the continuity in the objectives and main lines of its approach contributed to the high estimation of LEADER practice for rural development by observers and policymakers. As the assessment of the local development scheme so far has remained linked to case-specific valuation, European comparative studies and synthesis findings on its impact are rare. The long-term experience of LEADER application incites reflection on its effectiveness and influence for social, economic and cultural changes regarding rural development.

Focus on lessons learnt from the long-term use of the approach spread over recent years as the integration into the RDPs through the 'mainstreaming' concept posed a significant threat to its core principles. Actors in the field and analysts alike argued that practice of LEADER is losing its innovative character (Dax *et al*., 2016) and arguments of its great success seem highly excessive when actual participatory experiences and involvement of different social groups are analysed (Granberg *et al*., 2015; Navarro *et al*., 2015). In response to widespread criticism of excessive administrative burden, LAGs seem to gain again an increased level of autonomy in the period 2014-2020. Influences from higher levels (particularly the province level) towards implementation of LEADER funds by LAGs could be reduced and a re-orientation towards innovative projects, cross-sectoral cooperation and networking took place (Oedl-Wieser, 2015). The shift in the current programming period (2014-2020) towards the CLLD framework indicates its persistent strong appeal and relevance beyond rural areas.

Interrelations between different spaces and a more holistic assessment of spatial dynamics are an increased feature of regional discussion. Opening up local development discourse to inputs and stimulus from outside sources might enable further elaboration of innovative activities in rural areas. This includes active engagement with all relevant economic sectors and actors, and socio-cultural initiatives in order to tap the local potential of rural (and urban) regions. In this regard, assessment of LEADER experience suggests that technical adjustments would take account only of a restricted development potential and expectations from socio-cultural changes and reference to social innovation has a much better prospect for substantial local progress.

The assessment that LEADER is again focused on its wide scope of core principles is promising with regard to implications for rural development in general. Seeking a continued networking of all local and regional activities of rural areas, also with non-LEADER local action, includes enhanced opportunities for its lasting effectiveness in shaping the perspective of rural regions. In this respect, future LEADER and local development actions need to reinvigorate long-established core principles, most notably the notion of social innovation, and to concentrate on local and regional assets and deliver at that level, if its capacity to make a significant area-specific impact is to be realised again (Dax *et al*., 2016).

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