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Abstract

The main purpose of this research is focused on understanding the politico-administrative system and structure of rural policy implementation in the third programming period (2000-2006). Case studies have been conducted for selected measures of the Greek Rural Development Programme (RDP) and LEADER+ initiative. In-depth interviews were conducted with officials involved in the rural development policy implementation.

Inflexibility due to centralization, lack of personnel motivation and inadequacy of the personnel involved in policy implementation are the main weaknesses. Work seasonal overload is also a weakness, which can be caused by peak periods or by too many and in part possibly unnecessary documents, official permissions and other legal or administrative obligations.

The administrative personnel should be better motivated by financial bonus and properly trained. A central integrated database, accessible to all administrative levels and units, should also be designed. Such changes could lead to a smoother decentralisation process because in some cases centralisation is considered to cause communication obstacles, work overload and delays.

Key words: Rural Development Programme, policy implementation, governance, administration

Introduction

The aim of this research is focused on understanding the politico-administrative system and structure of rural policy implementation in the third programming period (2000-2006). Two Measures of the Greek Rural Development Programme (RDP), “Investments on agricultural holdings”, “Renewal and development of villages, protection and conservation of rural heritage” and LEADER+ initiative “Protection, promotion and enhancement of natural and cultural heritage” have been examined. Rural Development Programme top-down managing system was analysed and compared to LEADER + initiative bottom-up approach.

The afore-mentioned measures were selected, because they cover a diverse range of activities depicting to large extent the whole capacities and weaknesses of the politico-administrative system which is responsible for the implementation of the rural development policy. Concerning the popular measure of investments in agricultural holdings, its aim is defined as the modernisation of animal and crop production agricultural holdings and its implementation is managed at both national and regional level.

Measures concerning the conservation of rural heritage were selected as classical antiquities and other traditional characteristics of the past are abundant all over the countryside in Greece. The differentiation of rural economy in this dimension is important for viable sustainability, as it makes accessible a resource (rural heritage and agro-tourism), which mainly depends on the willingness to utilize “local knowledge” and local cultural elements.

According to the European Commission (2008), “Europe is endowed with diverse and attractive rural areas, rich landscapes and history, which greatly contribute to Europeans’ quality of life, including amongst the urban population. This valuable heritage deserves active preservation and

benefits from the support of the second pillar of the EU's CAP". Greece is characterised by rich in rural heritage which is connected to long-standing traditions and history.

"LEADER mainstreaming" was one of the most noticeable changes in the fourth programming period, as it became a part of the Rural Development Programmes of the EU member states namely Axis 4 and it is no more an independent initiative. Apart from this, LEADER was used as an example for many decentralisation changes in the fourth programming period. General purpose of LEADER+ is the support of "local" elements like for example values and capacities, (cf. High and Nemes 2007, Koutsouris 2008), while rural population and local communities have the chance to learn, cooperate and test their beliefs.

Furthermore, the establishment of the European Network for Rural Development and the National Rural Networks in the fourth programming period was based on the structure of the existing LEADER Networks. It seems that, although LEADER represents a relatively low percentage of the total budget for Rural Development in the European Union, it could be a very useful paradigm of good practice.

Methodology

This study provides useful information by using in-depth interviews with public actors, who were involved in the implementation of the Greek Rural Development Programme 2000-2006. The method that has been applied for data analysis is based on a qualitative approach.

Qualitative research provides the opportunity to the researcher to see the pluralisation of the observed topic (Mason, 2002). The four analytical strengths of qualitative methods are: complexity, depth, context and dynamics (Milburn, 1995). Qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting and interpret the everyday social world (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). On the other hand, quantitative methods limit responses and are not flexible to follow information in every direction owing to the use of standardized questions (Patton, 2002).

In the current research, the method of in-depth interview was employed for the collection of qualitative primary data. A pilot semi-structured questionnaire was used in order to avoid weaknesses during the in depth interviews. Questions were separated into 3 sections. More specifically, the first section included questions about rural development policies delivery and the second one about rural development measures delivery. In the third section, interviewees were asked to state their opinions about the detailed review of delivery phases. Each interview lasted approximately 120-180 minutes.

After consideration of the points needed improvement a new questionnaire was formulated and used in the research. LEADER had also a specially designed questionnaire. This was a crucial decision as it was adjusted to the special politico-administrative features of LEADER+.

A number of seven interviewees were selected from national, regional and local public services, considering their administrative responsibilities and level of hierarchy. The interviewees were visited and personally contacted the interviewees. All interviews were conducted face to face and both notes were taken as well as digital recording was used. The questionnaire was at the disposal of the interviewee before the meeting. Thus, he/she was able to answer in detail and thus was better prepared for answering the questions. Although the questions were posed according to the order they appeared on the questionnaire and further categorization was not pertaining to the goals of this research, reconstruction of the interview content was occasionally necessary, as certain pieces of information which were orally provided during the interview, were concerning simultaneously more than one question. Thus, the digital recording was helpful for the completion of the questionnaire.

Before the interviews, a desk research was also conducted and the questionnaire design had taken into account the respective documents and data from various sources: Joint Ministerial Decisions 637/2005 in relation to investments on agricultural holdings, 505/2002 and 561/2004

concerning rural heritage and 518/2003 concerning Leader+, as well as related documents from the Ministry of Rural Development and Food website (<http://www.agrotikianaptixi.gr/>). The Operational Programme 2000-2006 of the Regional Authority of Central Macedonia was also taken under consideration.

Results

The Ministry of Rural Development and Food plays a critical role because it defines the institutional framework and the details for the implementation process of all RDP measures. “Gaps” and inefficiencies in the explanation of the details or delays in the institutional framework affect the whole process. Private actors do not play any important role with an exception for the case of LEADER.

“Investments in agricultural holdings”

Measure “Investments in agricultural holdings” was intended to improve the competitiveness of agricultural sector, reduce the production cost, improve production quality and promote alternative income resources, apart from farming, in the countryside in the third programming period. It also aimed to preserve and improve the natural environment, hygiene and animal welfare.

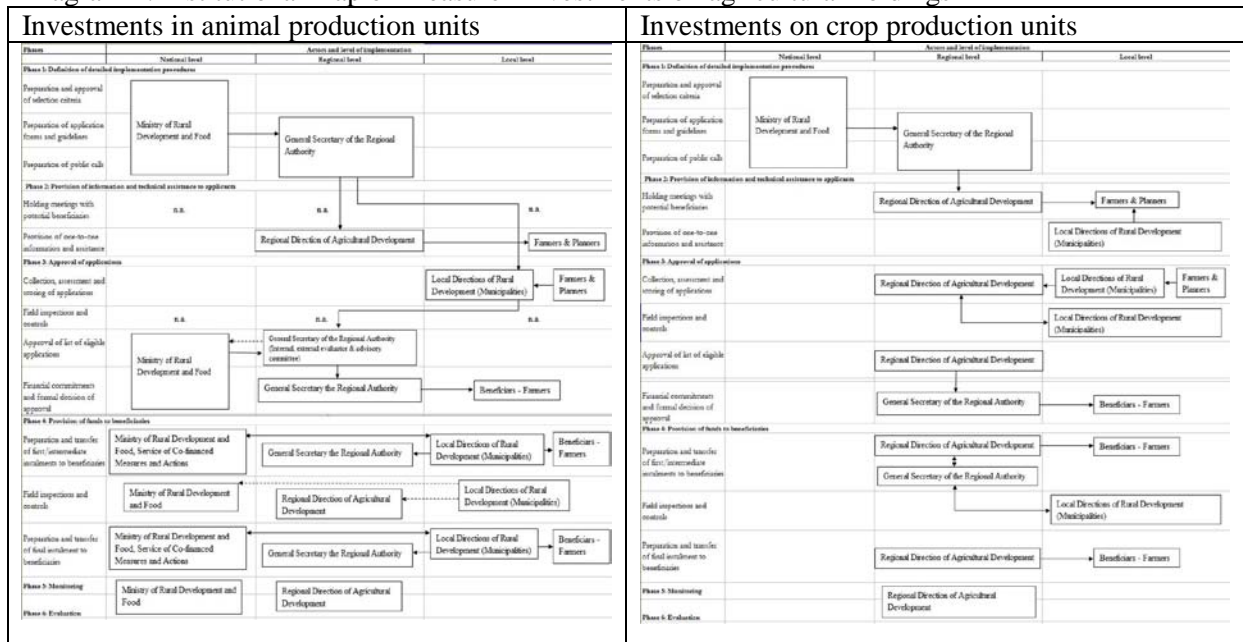
Concerning the measure’s managerial system two sub-measures were introduced. The first involved investments of animal production units and the second investments in crop production. In the first case of animal production investments, central authorities of the Greek Ministry of Rural Development and Food were responsible for the management of the measure implementation at national level. This type of management system was characterized by a high degree of institutionalized relations between stakeholders and great complexity.

The politico-administrative structure of the second sub-measure, “investments in crop production” was originally much more decentralized. Implementation bodies in charge of the sub-measure were the 13 Regional Authorities of the country, responsible also for implementing a range of measures under the umbrella of Regional Operational Programmes. While decentralization appeared to have positively contributed to the reduction of the complexity of procedures, from 2005 onwards, the management of this sub-measure passed again back to the Ministry of Rural Development and Food national level authorities and ultimately funded by the National Operational Programme for the Development and Reconstruction of the Countryside. The main reasons for this complicated situation was the lack of motivated and educated personnel and the inadequate information flow between the authorities at national and regional level. Thus, its management became more or less in line to the management of the sub-measure on animal production investments.

Concerning investments in crop production units (Diagram 1), the politico-administrative competence is much more decentralized. The main responsible actors for the implementation of crop production investments sub-measure were the Regional Authorities and most of the phases of its implementation were also conducted at regional level.

As far as the animal production investments are concerned, the Ministry of Rural Development and Food was responsible for its implementation. Although the whole administrative system is more centralised, it seems that it is much more complicated at the same time. Even when the administrative system of a particular measure or sub-measure is controlled at national level by the Ministry, it is difficult to avoid the involvement of regional and local authorities. Some of the phases, such as the file submission by project applicants is more preferable to take place at local or regional level.

Diagram 1: Institutional map of Measure “Investments on agricultural holdings”



According to the opinions of the interviewees, the main problem was lack of regularity in submissions of applications flow, evaluations of the projects and payments to the beneficiaries according to the deadlines, as well as the fact that different public services were responsible for approval of the project and the payments. Eligibility criteria excluded applicants with less than 3-year working experience or too small enterprises. The number of external experts and the staff members should be greater. Administration technical support expected to be better, if a better efficiency from the contacts with potential applicants. Lack of motivation and shortages in the administrative personnel, caused delays in particular during the peak periods of calls and application submission as well as the evaluation of the proposed projects for funding. A regularity in contrast to the deadline-led program implementation would also improve the communication and coordination of the measure in general.

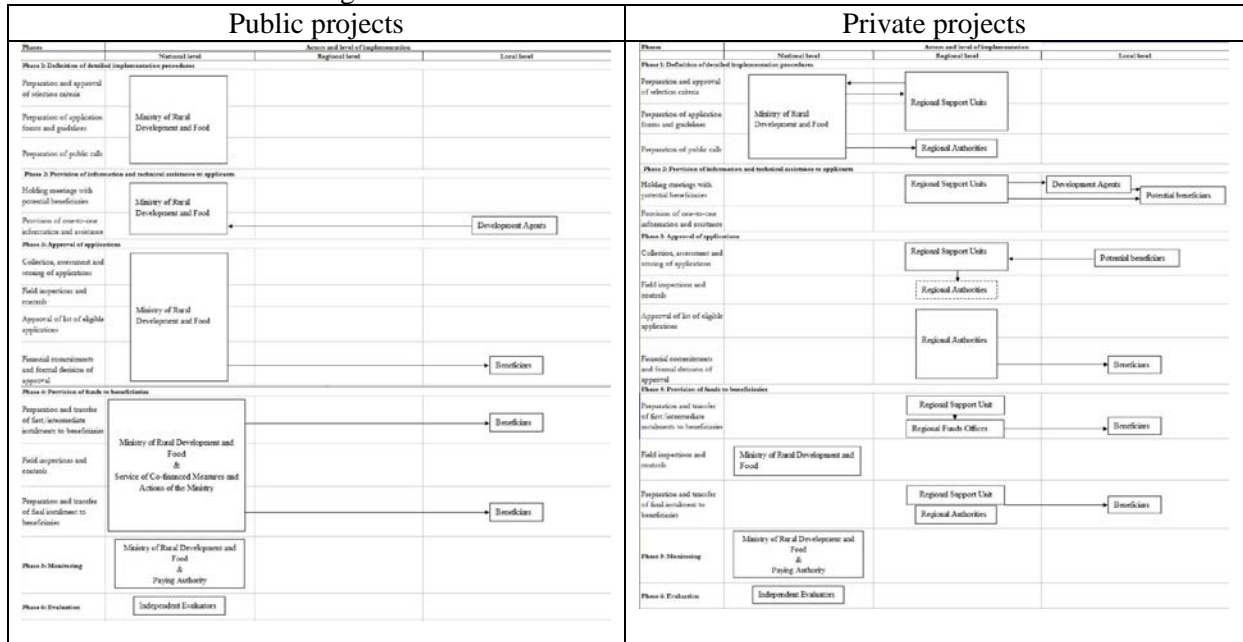
Concerning the administrative procedure, a large number of unnecessary documents contributed to the complexity. A large number of administrative and legal procedures (certificates, permissions, contracts, legal documents, experts' planners' and engineers' consulting, etc), resulted in serious delays and high project cost for the applicants. In the past, there were no restrictions on the fund available due to low degree of competition among applicants. All eligible applications that could meet the set of standards, could pass to the next level and be approved.

In the case of animal production investments, approximately 1-7 days were needed for the preparation of an application. The same time is also needed for the approval of a single application. The procedure for a single payment took 1-3 days after the approval. However, actor responsible for the provision of funds was also responsible for a large number of additional RDP measures. Peak periods in application processing leading to seasonal work overload were the most critical issue. Sometimes there were serious delays at national and regional level co-financing. For crop production investments, 2-3 months were needed for the preparation of an application; 7-9 months were needed for the approval of a single application, and more than a month for processing the payment of a single application. The regional paying authority was also responsible for a large number of additional measures. Main critical issues in providing funds to applicants were peak periods in application processing leading to work overload and delays in administrative inspections and controls of the approved projects.

“Renewal and development of villages, protection and conservation of rural heritage”

In case of the “Renewal and development of villages, protection and conservation of rural heritage” RDP measure, public projects were implemented by the Ministry of Rural Development and Food, while private projects by Regional Authorities. Paying agency was the Ministry of Rural Development and Food in case of public projects and the Regional Funds Office for private projects.

Diagram 2: Institutional map of Measure “Renewal and development of villages, protection and conservation of rural heritage”



Actors interviewed agreed that the most problematic stage was that of call preparation and provision of funds, inspection as well as analysis of primary data collected. Critical factors favourable for the delivery procedure are the possible previous experience of applicants with similar schemes and the requirements to apply for the measure. Lack of motivation and the numerous administrative and legal obligations are critical factors which affect the procedure negatively.

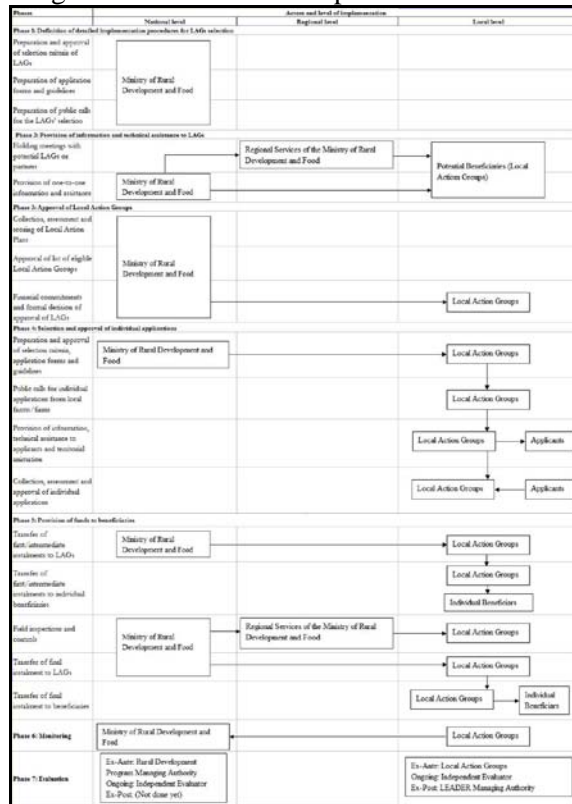
Main critical issues in providing information and technical assistance are the inadequacy of human resources and technical skills as well as the inappropriate means of information and communication. 4-6 months were needed to be spent in average for the preparation of an application as well as for the approval of a single application. More than 1 month was needed for processing a single payment for a single application. The most important weaknesses of the monitoring system, as mentioned during the collection of primary data, were the lack of an integrated information system and the insufficient co-operation among the authorities involved in the implementation of the measure at national, regional and local level.

LEADER+ initiative

Concerning LEADER+ initiative, there are 40 LAGs in Greece, which are responsible for the implementation of LEADER+. All LAGs are under the supervision of the Ministry of Rural Development and Food. A public call is announced just before the beginning of the programming

period by the Ministry of Rural Development and Food. Every candidate LAG submits an application in order to get involved in the implementation of LEADER+. These applications are evaluated considering specific standards. After the necessary changes and adoptions in their proposals, the selected LAGs and the Ministry of Rural Development and Food sign a contract agreement. After this process, the selected LAGs are responsible for the implementation of LEADER+.

Diagram 3: Institutional map of LEADER+ initiative



About 2-3 months were needed for the evaluation and the final approval of the Local Action Groups and more than 12 months until the agreement was signed. After this stage LAGs are in charge of the implementation of LEADER+ initiative. The selection criteria of the individual project applications were partially defined and decided by the LAGs under the general guidance of the Ministry of Rural Development and Foods. However, the selection criteria could differ among LAGs. Applications were approved and selected by LAGs. The RDP and the public call imposed constraints on the identification of the responsible subject of LAG management. About 16-30 days were needed for the approval of a single application by the LAG. The less time-consuming procedures and the less complexity as described above are attractive conditions for private innovators (cf. Dargan and Shucksmith 2008).

LEADER+ can provide useful results from local-specific conditions and can be regarded as a laboratory of rural development (cf. Korf and Oughton 2006, Ray 2000). The most noticeable difference lies in the “bottom-up” approach of LEADER+ which does not appear in the single measure approach. This approach omits the middle (regional) administrative level and reduces the complexity of the whole politico-administrative system. LEADER+ system is not only simpler but also slightly more formalized than the single measure systems at average are. In LEADER+

there are more detailed criteria than in single measures. Also, the procedures are less time-consuming, as they are implemented by specialized private actors (LAGs).

Conclusions and policy recommendations

Complexity is the first critical point during the implementation of the “Investments on agricultural holdings” specifically in agricultural production. This complexity is higher than in “Renewal and development of villages, protection and conservation of rural heritage” Measure because of the increased need of transparency and strict control of considerable financial support in form units.

Even when there is a need of strict financial control is strong, the decentralization does not impinge transparency. Particularly, in case of crop production investments, the flexibility of lower administration level is effectively combined with the “paradox of weakness” (prefectural monitoring committee works independently and gives reports to Regional Authority and thus the latter can claim to the beneficiaries that a decision does not depend on the Regional Authority). The decentralization restricts in case of RDP the complexity and is not incompatible with formalization. This is more evident in case of LEADER+.

Other issues to be mentioned are also the weak motivation of personnel and sometimes the quantitative or qualitative inadequacy, the analysis of data collected, the work overload caused by too many legal and administrative obligations like permissions, certificates and other documents or controls which may be not necessary. Peak periods caused by deadline-calls lead also to overload. This may be due to the demand of the state to control the row of financial support. However, if the submissions were continuous, there were no peak periods and no work overload.

Flexibility and decentralization can be compatible with the transparency, when authorizations are distributed to different “collegial” organs at the same administrative level. The administrative personnel should be better motivated by financial bonus and trained. A central integrated database with all information should be designed for saving and “filtering” all information derived from any document. Thus, unnecessary certificates and additional controls which offer repeated information can be restricted. Centralization of electronic database accessible to all administrative levels and units facilitates the procedures and is advisable, while geographical and institutional centralization of authorities only cause communicational obstacles, work overload and delays and thus it is inadvisable.

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More information at: <http://www.rudi-europe.net>

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