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LAGGING BEHIND OR LEADER IN LOCAL DEMOCRACY?

*An assessment of LEADER-type development
projects as a tool for democratic integration in the
contested countryside*

Kjell Andersson & Imre Kovách

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Contents

1 Introduction.....	7
2 Objectives of the research.....	9
3 Methods and material.....	11
4 Alternative models.....	13
5 The importance of the context	15
6 The research groups and the conduct of the research	17
References.....	21

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The LAGs (Local Action Groups) and the LEADER –type development projects stand at as a core in European rural development at the micro level (Ray 2000; Kovách 2000). Although coupled to development programs generated by the Structural Funds, the LAGs have operated on a bottom up basis, mobilizing local energies and ideas and implementing them in a relatively free fashion, unbridled by unnecessary bureaucracy. The operating principle of the LAGs and LEADER groups has been the *project*, which has been interpreted as the organizational device to cope with the contingency, complexity and fast change of the late modern area (Andersson 2009). However, the project as a temporary device has not been the sole organizational instrument of the late modern era: actually, a plethora of new organizational forms such as (public-private) hybrid organizations, networks and task forces have been seen, fulfilling functions that earlier were confined to classical public organizations or their counterparts in the corporate or civic sectors. Thus, one of the main development trends in organizational life has been the mix of public and private organizations and actions.

The driving forces behind the development above have thus been the increasing complexity, fluidness, speed and “un-governmentability” of the late modern age. In the rural areas, the relatively homogenous society of the heyday of modernization, the society with plain fields, farmers and their linkages to the external agri-industrial complex, has been broken up and replaced by the contested countryside (Murdoch et al. 2003). In this contested countryside, the old agricultural and rural legacy is questioned by the exurbanites and rural newcomers that in large numbers have “invaded” the countryside in most Western nations, but also by other interests and stakeholders such as environmental protectionists and energy producers. The result has been an increasing difficulty to steer and govern the rural society, and of course also to develop it. Today, scholars are discerning a “post-contested” countryside in which the squeeze of agricultural cost-reduction has forced people to find new pathways and join forces to avert the real threats of the countryside. Thus, there is in many areas what could be conceptualized as an “unfolding rural web” in which old inhabitants and newcomers alike try to find new ways to live, and make their living, in the rural areas (van der Ploeg & Marsden 2008). This new development trend has many facets, but at its core

we find different kinds of new rural goods and services (Overbeek & Terluin 2006) coupled to consumption and the new, late modern, middle class (Marsden 2009). This new web may largely be a spontaneous phenomenon but at the same time it is obvious that “orchestration instruments” (Andersson 2005) such as LEADER has an important role in its continuation and success.

LEADER and LAGs have during their history obviously had a dual role. On the one hand they have been an instrument with which to channel development funds to local areas, fine-tuning the needs and the investments. On the other hand, they have been the organizational instruments to orchestrate, bring about, development in the era of the complex, contested, countryside. Given that development funds in the future probably will dwindle (Uusitalo 2009), the second function of LAGs and LEADER (or their equivalents) will obviously gain in importance.

The literature on the new organizational instruments, of which LEADER is one important example, is a highly scattered one. Beginning in the early 1970s Pressman & Wildavsky (1973) noted that the output of representational democracy, political decisions, seldom were implemented as originally were intended. Instead, several groups and actors distorted ready made decisions in their struggle for resources and advantages. Pressman & Wildavsky warned against too many actors in the implementation process but later authors have on the contrary argued that late modern conditions, seemingly, require a considerable number of actors, co-operating on a horizontal basis, in central stages of the policy process such as implementation (O’Toole 1997; O’Toole & Hall 2000). This kind of reasoning is on the one hand related to organizational and managerial efficiency, and is in this sense highly instrumental. It presupposes also the system of representational democracy and its principles and rules. However, on the other hand, many authors hint also at participatory democracy and overall new conceptions of, and expansions of the scope of, democracy (Kenny 2000). One central notion is here the stakeholder, which has been defined as an actor “having a moral or economic stake in the outcome of a public decision-making process” (Leach 2006, 101). By blending efficiency and moral-principal arguments in that sense authors seems to take a huge step from the relatively well know territory of representative democracy and associated bureaucracy into a new kind of political-regulative system. At stake are universal democratic principles but

also efficiency of public management and social action, and even peaceful development or unrest in parts of society. Since LAGs/LEADER organizations more or less are archetypes of these new types of organizations the problematique hinted at above are central also for the future of these rural development instruments.

1.2 Relations to other research

The envisaged research and activity relates to the SUSTAIN network which was founded in 2003 in Helsinki. The network focuses primarily on short term organizations and their long term effects such as environmental sustainability but it has successively been broadened thematically to include also other forms of new organizations as well as its scope in terms of policy fields is wide and include both regional and rural policy. The countries included in the network are currently 11: Finland, Sweden, Great Britain, France, Ireland, The Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Hungary, Lithuania and USA. However, there are also attempts to broaden it to New Zealand and Australia. The network has been active in several projects and international research proposals. Among the publication related to the networks, two Finnish books “Project Proliferation and Governance” (Sjöblom et al. 2006) and “Projektiyhdistykunnan kääntöpuolia” (Rantala & Sulkunen) can be mentioned. Also internationally the network’s voice have been heard (Kovach & Kucerova 2006; Csurgó, Kovách, & Megyesi 2009; Kovách & Kristóf 2009). Recently there were even something of a broader breakthrough with the publication of the Special Issue of Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning on The Project State featuring articles by Sjöblom & Godenhjelm (2009; Andersson (2009) and Kovach & Kucerova (2009). In addition Andersson et al. (2009) edited recently an international volume on an adjacent theme, rural-urban relations. The proposed research project would fit neatly into this stream and widen it both thematically and geographically as well as the network itself would give invaluable support to the specific research project in question.

2 Objectives of the research

The objective of the research would be to get a clearer picture of LAG and LEADER action as an organizational device to promote development in the countryside today with its complex features of multiple, and sometimes contradictory, interests and its “poor road map” predicament, that is, absence of clear development paths and visions of

the type that characterized the modernization period until the last decades of the previous century. Following this objective, two main functions of LAG/LEADER would be highlighted: their ability to generate new visions, networks and actions (the innovative potential) and their ability to regulate, ease, conflicts. What is new in this proposal, in relation to the bulk of the literature in the field, is our ambition to analyze LAG/LEADER against classical conceptions, and theories, of democracy and in this way avoid the danger of using democracy, or other central concepts, as a mere metaphor and missing the insight of generations of theorists of democracy in analyzing what is essentially new societal phenomena. This may sound, *and is*, theoretical but our hope is that a deepened understanding of these new types of organizations and actions may help to resolve for example the Gordic knot of CAP versus its “Second Pillar”, the antagonism between structurally entrenched old schemes and new action driven by economic and political development. For, as the late modern discourse goes, these types of conflicts should be resolved “from the bottom-up”. As we will expand on later, studies of LAGs and LEADER must be embedded in their concrete societal settings and therefore, the combination of the scholarly perspective and the comparative approach that marks this proposal is essential.

3 Methods and material

Following March & Olsen (1989) democratic theory, and practice, may from an institutional viewpoint be divided into two main conceptions: aggregative and integrative. Aggregative theorists emphasize the interest- and preference-aggregating, and power-balancing, functions of democracy while integrative theorists put emphasis on deliberation and community (Bogason 2009). Superficially speaking, the conception of aggregative democracy has its counterpart in traditional representative democracy while the notion of integrative democracy fits better with the postmodern forms, embodied in for instance the new types of organizations discussed above. Therefore, the model of integrative democracy may seem to be the right point of departure if one aims at analyzing LAGs/LEADER making use of core democratic theory. However, the two conceptions have both pros and cons and therefore the right strategy seems to be to make use of both, mirroring LAG/LEADER in the best elements of each model. In a previous paper (Godenhjelm et al. 2009) the author and colleagues outlined a set of factors decisive in analyses of democracy, deriving from a conception of the decision-making process in general. These factors, and their bearings on the aggregative and integrative model respectively, which can be quite different, will be discussed shortly below. Also the hypothetical position of LAG/LEADER in this two-model-universe will be hinted at briefly. In the literature, there are also other criteria for the assessment of the democratic nature of organizations and actions (Fung & Wright 2003; Leach 2006). These, and their implications, will be discussed after the explication of our proposed factors and their relations to the two democracy-conceptions. The factors scrutinized below are: **actors, institutional linkage, forms of participation, conflict resolution, forms of knowledge, outcome and accountability.**

Actors: In the aggregative model the actors are mainly of the political elite type: politicians, civil servants and the like. In the integrative model there is a wider range of actors with citizens at the grass root level and various stakeholders as notable groups, together with more traditional political actors. LAG/LEADER may be hypothesized as following the integrative model with a relatively broad representation of interests and ideas but at the same time more instability and greater transaction costs, stemming from for instance unfamiliarity with public-organizational routines. However, there are also indications of a traditional, “elitist”, representation in LAGs (Thuesen 2010). An

interesting observation is the fact that LEADER in several settings seem to have a female majority among its activists (Andersson 2003; Andersson 2009).

Institutional linkage: In the aggregative type of democracy, different kinds of organizations and organization-like entities are closely related to other organizations and the whole political system. In a more integrative system, organizations and entities like projects operate more on their own and are ends in themselves. The linkage is here more through deliberation and the common good that this is thought to produce. The placement of LAG/LEADER here seems to be an empirical question with a gospel leaning to the integrative type but with attempts from the traditional bureaucracy to control what L/Ls are doing.

Forms of participation: In the aggregative model, participation is formal and based on political-administrative routines. However, stakeholders and major interests may be consulted and de facto strongly influence decisions. In the integrative model participation is more varied both in terms of form and substance; small groups may gather for days but large public rallies may also be part of participation in integrative democracy. Hypothetically, LAG/LEADER may be placed in the integrative category but empirical research should determine the influence from more traditional organizational structures.

Conflict resolution: One of the central features of aggregative democracy is the emphasis on bargaining, compromise and balance between interests. In integrative democracy, on the other hand, emphasis is put on discussion, deliberation and collective learning. The position of L/L is here of great interest and should be illuminated through more empirical research.

Forms of knowledge: In the aggregative model formal and expert knowledge have a central position. In the integrative model lay knowledge and partisan views plays as important roles as other forms of knowledge. Also here must the position of LAG/LEADER be determined by empirical research in a systematic fashion.

Outcome: In aggregative democracy, the missions of different kinds of organization are clearly determined and the same holds for mechanism to fulfill this mission, for example transfer of results. In integrative democracy, the outcome of organizations and actions is more generally perceived; it can be deliberative processes in themselves or it

can be diffusion of ideas or “trickling down” of any result. The literature shows that this is a weak point in many L/L activities and it should be studied carefully.

Accountability: In an aggregative system, it is clear who does what, how and to whom he or she is responsible. In the integrative model of democracy the questions above are much more unclear since the primary goal is to stimulate action and not to control it. The question of accountability is here closely coupled to the one above, or more precisely, the *sustainability* of different kinds of outcomes. If there are clear long term results of for example LAG/LEADER action it is also possible to construct a “long term accountability chain” and make use of feedback loops. The other alternative is that the traditional form of accountability is used, which may be at odds with the thought behind LAGs and LEADERS since it may hinder long term innovative results which are one of their goals. The construction of long-term monitoring instruments is here crucial.

4 Alternative models

Fung & Wright (2003) operates with six points in their model for assessment of participatory governance. These are deliberation, action, monitoring, capacity building, coordination and outcome. Outcome is the same as in our model above, while monitoring comes close to accountability and deliberation to forms of participation, *with the integrative model in mind*. Coordination may also be related to conflict resolution although this factor has several facets. All in all, this model tends towards integrative democracy at the same time as it misses the opportunity to evaluate action and organizations against two democracy conceptions which both have their strengths and weaknesses. Leach (2006) talks directly about “ideals”, inclusiveness, representativeness, impartiality, transparency, deliberativeness, lawfulness and empowerment, and captures in this way much of the virtues in both democracy-conceptions. However, there are inconsistencies, and even direct contradictions, between several of the items and we believe that the best way to handle this is to be aware of the different logics and world-views that lay behind the ideal-items and relate LAG/LEADER organizations and actions directly to this multidimensional world. This way we can learn on behalf of L/L but also on behalf of the two democracy conceptions and maybe take some steps towards a synthesis.

5 The importance of the context

The above reasoning is based upon the general assumption of a late modern society, to a large extent following a different logic than the modern one and, thus, requiring new types of instruments such as LAGs and LEADER. However, as well as it is essential to empirically investigate how L/L actually work, it is paramount to look at the surroundings in which LAGs and LEADER are embedded; how do the societies actually look like? On the one hand, it is commonplace that European countries may be grouped according to political “system” or –tradition (Rokkan 1999; Loughlin 2004; Lidström 2003), or type of countryside (Hoggart et al. 1995). Especially the political characteristics are under attack from the forces undermining the nation state and proliferating the networks – and strengthening the EU – but still borders matter, especially in terms of traditions and informal systems. On the other hand, LAG/LEADER type of organizations and actions presupposes a considerable amount of civic culture/social capital (Almond & Verba 1963; Putman 1995) and it is also well known that this differs markedly between societies, for instance, former Soviet block nations may have developed a new set of formal institutional structures but the civil society may not give them the support that it is supposed to do following Western models (Dittrich & Jeleva 2009). This, later type of condition may easily lead to a “working the system” situation which is known from studies of development projects, appropriated by local power structures using them for purposes quite different from those intended (Kumar & Corbridge 2002). A different problematique, but with effects of a somewhat similar kind is the possibility that the horizontal governance/bottom up discourse during the last decades is just a mere “Glasnost” in the long term organizational trajectory and that hierarchical steering and hard core interest struggle and balancing again will gain phase and that the fortune of instruments such as LAGs and LEADER will be left in the hands of cynical players with different kinds of hidden agendas. There are, for instance, clear indications of a “back to bureaucracy” in LEADER/LAG actions recently (Larsson & Waldenström 2009) which should be taken ad notam and studied carefully.

Contextual factors as those above can to some extent be controlled by investigating a sample of LAGs and LEADER projects in a group of countries representing the main political-administrative and rural variations in the European setting. Thus, the countries

included in the project are, besides more specific motivations, chosen to represent different categories in the two-dimensional universe built up by Lidström's (2003) and others' political system/tradition classification scheme and the type of countryside system suggested by Hoggart et al. (1995) (Table 1). These schemes are not uncontested, quite the contrary, but they are rather widely used and point, regardless of other merits, towards useful comparative differences in the European setting. However, their use here is mainly in order "to get started" and they may not be expanded further in the comparative stage of the research project.

Table 5.1 A two-dimensional classification of European countries/countrysides

Country	Political system/tradition	Type of countryside
Core study countries		
Finland	Nordic	Marginalist
Hungary	Central European	Hybrid
United Kingdom	British	Naturalist
Romania	Balkanian	Agrarian
Optional core study country		
France	Napoleonic	Agrarian/Naturalist
Optional case study countries (4-5 will be specified later)		

6 The research groups and the conduct of the research

The concrete research objective is to analyze the LAGs and LEADER actions in first and foremost the four (five) core study countries, but optionally also a set of other European countries, through the factors related to the decision-making process and the two models of democracy, hereby assessing L/L against two living theories and models that despite, or perhaps through, their mutual inconsistencies chart central modes, and terms, of conduct in contemporary societies. We strongly believe that empirically grounded, scholarly, theories are needed in order to develop LAG/LEADER, or equivalents, sustainably further through shifting political-organizational conjunctures.

The core research will be conducted by a research team at the Swedish School of Social Science at the University of Helsinki and by the subcontractor, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences with the research team of Professor Imre Kovách. The research in Finland, Hungary, Romania and UK will be directly covered by the research funds granted by the Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry while additional funding will be applied for in the case of France, from French sources. The optional countries will be involved through invitation of LAG/LEADER researchers to contribute with papers on the variation of existing practices and dynamics of L/L that could be discussed at a scheduled European seminar and included in a final edited volume or special journal issue (see below). The special topics and focused research questions will be determined by the Finnish and Hungarian teams together with the scientific steering group. The Finnish team will be responsible for the work in Finland and UK, while the Hungarian theme will be responsible for the research in Hungary and Romania. Regarding France, the optional case, responsibility will be shared between the two teams, as well as both teams will handle the contacts with the external contributors. Senior lecturer, Dr. Kjell Andersson will on behalf of the Swedish School of Social Science be responsible for the project vis-à-vis the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, while an international steering group will include Kjell Andersson, Imre Kovách, Professor Erland Eklund from the Åbo Academy University in Vaasa, Professor Terry Marsden from Cardiff University and an additional member from France.

The research activities will start with desk research. The “LEADER system” at the EU-level, including its historical development and its main features today, will be sorted out. Subsequently, the national regulations of LEADER and LAGs (in all EU countries), especially to the extent that they are explicitly stated in official documents, will be outlined. Thereafter, available data of LAGs and LEADER projects will be collected, thoroughly for the core research countries, and more superficially for the optional case study countries. Upon this phase, and with the support of expert interviews, two or three LAGs in each of the core study countries will be selected for in-depth case studies. In the same manner call for papers will be sent out to researchers in the optional countries with the focus of interest defined for each country, or group of countries. The project will compare the material gathered now with the findings of earlier LEADER research, published for example in the LEADER special issue of *Sociologia Ruralis* in 2000.

Of special interest generally, will be the ways LAGs are governed - internal power relations, key institutional and individual actors and their interest in maintaining LEADER, mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion. Which institutions/mechanisms have been created to this end and which are their linkages to the “population”, of the LAG and of its constituency? Further, how do these institutions work, for example in terms of conventional and unconventional methods, and what are the frames/restrictions set by the surrounding society (do LAGs represent an added value in traditional democratic terms, or do they compete with traditional democratic steering and point towards a more pluralistic model of democracy, or even a new way of bureaucratic rural development)? And further down to the projects: do they enhance/have a bearing on bottom up development or are they mainly instrumental with few implications regarding steering, public management and citizen involvement? These questions, related to the “territory” of LAGs and LEADER, will naturally be related to the theoretical research questions and their operationalisations expanded upon above.

The project will thus start with desk research on the questions outlined above. In the *seventh month* of the research project the first research seminar will be held, at which the case studies will be determined and the topics of interest and invitations to the external researchers (representing the optional countries) will be prepared. During the next phase, the case studies will be made as well as the extra papers will be prepared.

During the second research seminar, scheduled to the *thirteenth month*, the case study drafts, as well as the draft of the additional papers, will be discussed and a comparative report/conclusions will be prepared. During the next phase the case studies, the additional papers and the comparative report/conclusions will be finalized. During the third research seminar, involving the Finnish and Hungarian teams and the authors of the additional papers, plus optional delegates invited by the Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, the papers and their implications from the point of view of policy recommendations will be discussed. The last work-phase will be devoted to the finalization of an edited volume alternatively special journal issue and an optional “white book” with policy recommendations. This, last seminar, is scheduled to *October 2011*.

Table 6.1 The course of the research tentatively depicted

Time schedule, months from the projects' start	Activity	Actors involved	Responsible partner
1-7	Desk research	Finnish and Hungarian teams	Finnish and Hungarian teams
7	First scientific meeting	Finnish and Hungarian team, steering group	Finnish team
7-14	Case studies, complementary extra papers by invited researchers	Finnish and Hungarian teams, invited researchers	Finnish and Hungarian teams
14	Second scientific meeting	Finnish and Hungarian teams	Hungarian team
14-19	Comparative analysis, finishing of case studies and extra papers	Finnish and Hungarian teams, invited researchers	Finnish and Hungarian teams
19	Conference (third scientific meeting)	Finnish and Hungarian teams, steering group, external researchers and optional invited political actors and civil servants	Finnish team
19-24	Edited volume/special journal issue, “white book”	Finnish and Hungarian teams, external researchers, optionally political actors and civil servants	Finnish and Hungarian teams, optionally political actors and civil servants

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Åsa Rosengren och Gunborg Jakobsson

Äldreomsorgen i Norden – med exempel från Herlev, Jakobstad, Sandefjord och Stockholm. Nordiska modellkommunprojektet NOVA.

2/98

Gunborg Jakobsson och Åsa Rosengren

Kartläggning av äldreomsorgen i fem nordiska kommuner. Herlev, Akureyri, Jakobstad, Sandefjord och Katarina-Sofia socialdistrikt, Stockholm. Nordiska modellkommunprojektet NOVA.

3/98

Susanne Jungerstam-Mulders

Extreme Right-wing Parties: Ideological, Protest or Racist Parties.

4/98

Kjell Andersson

Näringsutvecklingen i sydvästra Finlands skärgård 1985–1995. Tolv kommuner i ljuset av offentlig statistik.

5/98

Elina Vuola

Between the State and the Church – Nicaraguan Women's Reproductive Rights and the Promotion of Human Rights in the Finnish Development Cooperation.

6/98

Jouni Pirttijärvi

Indigenous Peoples and Development in Latin America.

7/98

Liisa Laakso, Iina Soiri and Zenebework Tadesse with Konjit Fekade

In Search of Democratic Opposition Constraints and Possibilities for Donors' Support in Namibia and Ethiopia.

SSKH Notat 1999

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1/99

Mika Helander

Publications on Ethnic Relations in Finland 1991–1996.

2/99

Leo Granberg, Erland Eklund and Kjell Andersson

Rural Innovation and Environment: New Development Paths in the Finnish Countryside?

3/99

Åtta studier i nya och gamla mediemarknader.

Arbetsrapport från kursen i medieekonomi vid Svenska social- och kommunalhögskolan vid Helsingfors universitet våren 1999.

4/99

Viveca Ramstedt-Silén

Riksdagsutskott eller kvinnoförening? Det kvinnliga nätverket i Finlands riksdag.

SSKH Notat 2000

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