

Local Action Groups and Participation¹

Research Note

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Abstract: *The aim of the paper is to present the role of LAGs in the context of the highly fragmented municipal structure of the Czech Republic. A set of factors such as; the number of municipalities of LAGs, the share of deputies from administration, entrepreneurs and NGOs in LAGs, and the population of LAGs will be analyzed to see how they influence the effectiveness of LAGs. Based on the research conducted, we also strive to highlight the fact that for the participants LAGs are beneficial both economically and from the perspective of the community. The need to revive politics and its dynamics through participation finds an excellent instrument in LAGs.*

Keywords: *Local Action Group, CLLD, the Czech Republic, Participation*

In many countries, including the Czech Republic, local action groups (LAGs) are one of the most widespread and well functioning forms of inter-municipal cooperation. Their success is partly due to the three different segments on which the cooperation is based. These are: representatives of the public administration (mostly

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mayors), local employers (the self-employed, entrepreneurs) and the non-profit sector, represented mainly by local associations. Although one of the conditions for establishing a LAG is that public administration members must constitute less than 50 percent, it is often mayors who play an essential part. In the current model of local governance, LAGs are a convenient structure of cooperation for their primary focus on community planning and citizen participation. Many studies show that active citizens, those who are willing to do something for their municipality, are a key prerequisite for a municipality to thrive. LAGs are thus an ideal platform for cooperation between citizens and elected politicians.

Local Action Groups (LAGs) have become the second most widespread and the most dynamic platform for inter-municipal cooperation in the Czech Republic due to the easy availability of subsidies. There are 185 LAGs and 550 Voluntary Leagues of Municipalities (VLM) in the Czech Republic as of 2016. Inter-municipal cooperation is extremely important as it facilitates municipal development and the provision of services which Czech municipalities are legally bound to provide. The population of the Czech Republic is substantially fragmented: over 80 % of the 6,253 municipalities in existence have populations under 1,000. Hence, municipalities must closely cooperate.

The concept of Local Action Groups arrived in the Czech Republic with a delay of about 10 years from when this cooperation platform was introduced in Western Europe (Granberg, Kjell 2014; Kull 2014). The year 2001 saw the launch of an informational campaign for the LEADER methodology as well as the first meetings between representatives of the Rural Development Alliance (RDA), the Ministry of Regional Development (MRD) and other authorities. This period largely coincided with the creation of autonomous regions (the first regional elections were held in November 2000) as well as with the coming into effect of the public administration reform. Preparation for the establishment of the first LAGs commenced in 2002. These were typically based on the VLM platform. The MRD — through its Rural Development Programme (RDP) — funded the development of integrated strategies for the creation of rural micro-regions from 2002 to 2006. The year 2003 saw the formal establishment of management committees charged with the development of local development strategies which laid the foundations for the first LAGs. (Pavlíková 2007; Svobodová 2015)

Since the 1970s the focus has increasingly shifted to introducing democratic innovations aimed at higher civic participation and stimulation of the political process. In terms of local politics, which is closest to the public, the innovations strive for a greater participation of citizens in politics. Post-communist countries typically face lower public interest in politics due to incomprehensible policies and high levels of distrust in political institutions and politics. Therefore, higher participation in local

politics could partially alter the citizens' view of politics as such. Three basic levels of democratic innovations are recognized:

- 1) *Co-Governance* — implemented for example through a participatory budget and participatory planning.
- 2) *Direct democracy* — for example referendums, citizen lawmaking, removing politicians from office or various political initiatives.
- 3) *Deliberation* — emphasis on civil juries that aim, as a community, to propose acceptable solutions, discussion, collective consensual decisions etc. (Geissel, Newton 2012)

As mentioned earlier, LAG-based inter-municipal cooperation understands politics not only as a space for political actors (elected officials) — a considerable emphasis is placed on the citizen, who is a partner in developing both the municipality and entire region that participates in the cooperation. Although such a concept of municipal and regional development is more time-consuming, and consequently may appear less efficient, it is actually highly effective. Besides economic indicators, community-led local development (CLLD) also emphasizes social and environmental aspects. Many of the problems encountered at the local level go beyond the scope of the public administration system, often requiring a broader and therefore deeper, participation of other entities and citizens. LAGs fully meet this need.

The LAGs as an Instrument of Inter-municipal Cooperation for Effective Operation of Public Agencies, a project of the Union of Towns and Municipalities of the Czech Republic (OP HRE CZ.1.04/4.1.00/B6.00043) included a situation sociological survey that studied how stakeholders (all the three segments) understood selected aspects of cooperation and LAG activities. The project involved 72 LAGs (see map 1). We carried out 774 structured consultation interviews aimed primarily at identifying the relevant opinions and attitudes of the three main LAG components (local government /especially mayors/, local employers and non-profit sector). Of the mayors we surveyed, 77 % were full-time and 23 % part-time. In terms of the LAG composition, the highest number of responses came from local governments (37 %), followed by local employers (33 %) and the non-profit sector (30 %).

It was important for the survey to hold the consultation interviews with a sufficient number of respondents representing different size groups of municipalities. Based on a widely used classification, municipalities were grouped by their size as follows: up to 500; from 501 to 1,000; from 1,001 to 2,000; and over 2,000 inhabitants.

The survey was not designed to be representative of the Czech population because the group of individuals active in LAGs does not correspond to the composition of the general population. Yet, we believed it was important to monitor the socio-

demographic characteristics of respondents, especially in terms of gender, education and age. The consultation interviews were held with 65 percent of men and 35 percent of women. The age representation was evenly distributed, closely reflecting the composition of the entire working-age population. Regarding respondent distribution by education, the highest percentage (42 %) had university education. This particular characteristic demonstrates the substantial difference in the education structure of the LAG members and the entire adult population. The second most common education group were secondary school graduates with a leaving exam (39 %). While this paper does not aspire to analyze all the outputs of the data file, we will focus on the main aspects that are inherent to the LAG.

Respondents were first interviewed about what they considered the most important condition for municipal development. Table 1 shows the response for all the respondents (Total) and also how this attitude differs according to the three categories of the respondents. For the majority (40 %), the most important condition was the willingness to associate and to participate in solving problems; the attitudes of local employers (mainly entrepreneurs, self-employed) fell below this mean. Unlike the other two groups, local employers strongly indicated that the most important condition for successful development is a competent LAG manager.

Table 1: The most important precondition for a successful LAG (Respondent category, %)

Q "Could you please tell me what you think is the most important condition of your LAG's success?"	Category of respondents			Total
	local government	local employers	non-profit	
Willingness to associate and to participate in solving problems	42.5	35.1	43.3	40.3
Competent LAG manager	23.9	33.5	24.0	27.1
Sufficient number of young people interested in living in rural areas	2.6	4.6	5.5	4.1
Support from external political structures	1.5	1.3	1.4	1.4
Grant winning skills	24.3	21.8	23.5	23.2
Good location	0.4	0.4	0.0	0.3
Good living conditions	3.7	2.1	0.9	2.3
DON'T KNOW	0.0	0.8	0.5	0.4
Other	1.1	0.4	0.9	0.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Project consultation (2015)

The respondents see the role of LAGs especially in improving citizen involvement in the life of communities in the territory. This attitude spans nearly evenly across all the categories of municipal sizes — around 95 % (see Table 2). Perhaps only the smallest municipalities record a slightly higher but still very low level of negative responses. Mayors also appear to have a similar attitude to all the respondents, but again there is a very significant statistical difference between the standpoints of full-time mayors and part-time mayors.

Table 2: Focus on strengthening citizen participation (by municipality population, %)

Q "Could you please state whether you believe that LAGs should assume the following responsibilities in the future?"	Municipal size 4 categories				Total
	<= 500	501 – 1,000	1,001 – 2,000	2,001 +	
yes	94.4	97.8	93.9	96.4	95.7
LAG role – focus on strengthening citizen participation in the life of LAG municipalities					
no	5.1	1.6	3.4	1.8	2.9
DON'T KNOW	0.5	0.5	2.7	1.8	1.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Project consultation (2015)

Respondents were unequivocally against the idea that LAGs take over responsibilities pertaining to self-government and delegated powers. This attitude again testifies to the fact that LAG is fully voluntary, which proves to be highly effective.

Other attitudes and opinions

Respondents feel that LAGs should perform other tasks, in particular, strengthening citizen participation in the life of communities in the given territory. The respondents agreed that LAGs should coordinate, monitor and consequently represent municipalities in negotiations with the regional authorities. Approximately half of the respondents expect the same from LAGs in the case of negotiations with the ministries, but not with members of parliament.

Bureaucracy and red tape should, according to the respondents, be mitigated mainly through changes in legislation; another, less supported task, is to strengthen inter-municipal cooperation.

In order to streamline their activities, the respondents would like to continue leaning on a joint administrator, namely a joint project and grant specialist. A stronger requirement is to have a joint employment coordinator for the LAG territory (supported by 65 %). Most (75 % of respondents) voiced a request that LAGs train mayors in public administration.

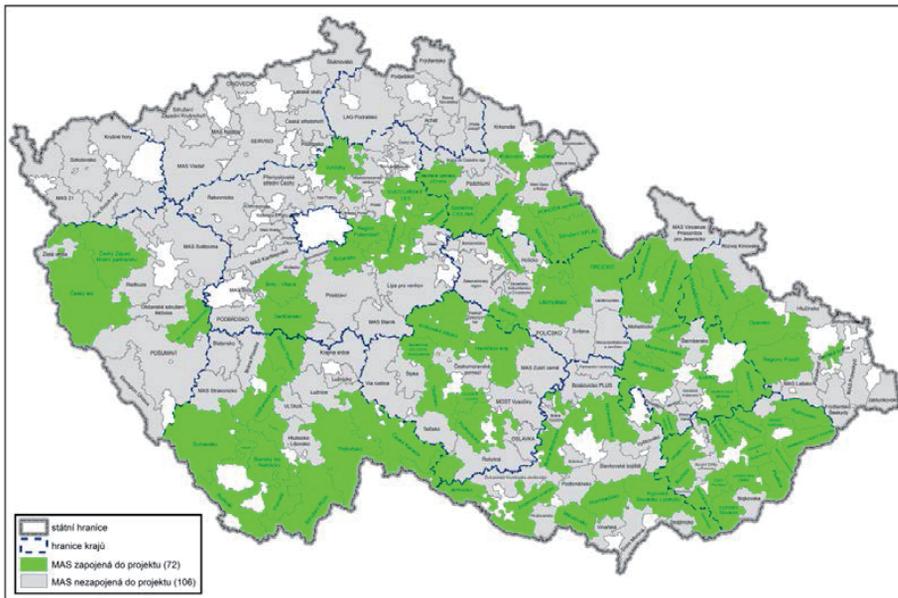
Just under 60 % of respondents would welcome legal services within the LAG. Most respondents rejected the idea of having joint accounting services that would improve public services. In contrast, “waste partnership” would be supported by 60 % of respondents.

Approximately 61 % of respondents would prefer a service that would ensure joint transportation for schools and the elderly.

Conclusion

The survey indicates that the respondents are aware of the advantages of the LAG platform, appreciate the voluntary cooperation and the fact that mayors and citizens can work together on developing their municipality. The respondents confirmed seeing the community-led development of the LAG area as completely natural. Shaping the community is truly the foundation of a successful municipality. In the Czech Republic, although democratic innovations and the need to improve participation have recently begun to be widely discussed, LAGs continue to be under researched despite the fact that the LEADER method is innovative, democratic, and highly participative.

Map 1: LAGs participating in the project



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