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**Features of the LEADER Programme as Local
Partnership in Hungary**

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The relevance of research topic

In the last two decades, due to the emergence and deepening of crisis-phenomena of democratic structures, representative democracies have become more formal and empty in the Western member states of the European Union. They have been transformed into such governmental structures in which the elite has been prevailing and the majority of citizens tend to turn their back on public affairs. In such types of democracies citizens elect representatives periodically and empower them to make decisions in issues affecting the given region. At the end of the last century, however, the claim that citizens can intervene in public affairs between elections and influence decisions concerning themselves has strengthened. Beside the representative forms, the direct ways of participation have also become important.

In the last few years, a new form of management, the governance creating the effect-mechanisms of social participation has gained ground in countries that face economic-social problems and governing crisis. This new governance conception does not proclaim the primacy of the state, instead it emphasises the partnership among the government bodies, the economic and social organizations.

The term partnership is fashionable and often used, but it does not have fix, authentic meaning. The term can refer to a wide range of associations and unions within which parties share information, tasks, risks and benefits. Partnership arrangements can have different goals, duration, scales, compositions, and can be based on different operating mechanisms. According to the characteristics of participants, horizontal and vertical partnerships can be distinguished. The vertical partnership means the cooperation among different decision-making levels. Conversely, in horizontal partnerships equal parties collaborate. Local partnerships that I examined belong to this latter group.

The local partnerships have become more and more popular means of governance. According to the experts, the reason for its fast spreading is that partnership increases efficiency by taking different interests into consideration, involving new material and intellectual resources. It also stimulates innovation and strengthens integration. In ideal case, partnerships simultaneously foster the economic growth and the social equality, which are key elements of sustainable development. Partnerships are able to tackle special problems by building trust among the representatives of different sectors. The cooperating participants can discuss their common affairs, get to know each other, elaborate and implement development strategies based on their needs.

The dissertation focuses on local partnerships which play an important role in the local implementation of the rural development policy of the European Union. I deal with the doctrinal necessity of local rural development partnerships, their significance as well as with national and international experiences of their practical

operation. The operational characteristics of local partnerships are examined through the example of the LEADER programme which is considered to be a very successful rural development initiative of the European Union. The programme is based on the partnership of local governments, entrepreneurs and civil societies, and it has introduced a completely new approach to rural development philosophy, methodology and practice in the member states. Within the framework of the initiative, rural development projects have been realised in more than 2000 European micro-regions in the last twenty years. Due to its effectiveness, the LEADER has been integrated as a methodological axis into the rural development policy of the second pillar of Common Agricultural Policy.

The reason for choosing just the Hungarian LEADER partnership as topic of the thesis is that because this initiative is regarded to be one of the best examples for multi-level self-governance model. On the one hand, it is a top-down development initiative, since it is mainly financed from EU sources and it is launched on the basis of directives of the European Committee. Besides, the central governments of the member states select the winning partnerships and the representatives of the central government continuously monitor their work. On the other hand, local rural development projects based on micro-regional ideas are supported, bottom-up cooperation is induced, and - in theory - decisions about the selection and financing of awarded projects are made by local people.

My personal motivations also played an important role in the choice of subjects. As a PhD student I spent a year at the Dutch Wageningen University. Here in the course of my research work, I studied more local rural development partnerships and I learnt the so-called governance conception as well. I decided at that time that I would target the operational characteristics of the national local rural development partnerships in my dissertation.

The reason for choosing just the LEADER initiative – beyond the above mentioned points – was that I was not only an observer, but also a participant in the programme. I worked as a project manager in a Local Action Group for one and a half year. Moreover, I made a paper for the scientific student conference under the direction of my supervisor about the problems raised in course of the national LEADER+ programme.

1.2. Raising the problems

The most current and problematic issues concerning local partnerships are summarised in the following paragraphs. The references placed in footnotes supporting my thoughts are detailed in the chapters of the literature review.

The transfer of responsibility and obligation may provide solution for decreasing bureaucracy and improving economic efficiency, but in reality the central governments do not share the power with local actors in many cases. The governmental bodies at higher levels usually avoid delegating functions to local

actors, and even when they do like this, they are still inclined to restrict and control local levels further on.

One of the much discussed issues concerning local partnerships is the participation of local people. According to the majority of experts, the participation of local actors in decision-making process is growing through the partnerships and thus wiser and fairer decisions can be made in development issues affecting them. Some Western-European case studies¹ confirm that working in a partnership does not necessarily end in real community participation and, in general, it does not automatically mean equal participation for all members.

The other central issue in the literature related to local partnerships is social involvement. It is widely considered that working in partnership is one of the most suitable means for fighting against social exclusion, since wide range of representatives of different sectors, even of the weaker interest groups of local communities are involved in local developments.

Some research², however, prove that partnerships, instead of reducing social exclusion just increase it. In the decision-making body of partnerships for instance male dominance is a frequent feature. The representatives of community and civil spheres are often scarcely audible alongside the public sphere, and even if the formerly excluded local actors are involved in partnership, they are usually at a disadvantage owing to the lack of intellectual and material resources.

Financial support in itself is not enough for the successful operation of local rural development partnerships. In addition to the building up of appropriate infrastructure, active participation of local actors and appropriate level of social involvement, the existence of some soft social factors are also essential to success. Such a soft factor is for instance the social capital. Surveys³ confirm that the social capital of Hungary is much lower than the indicators of Western member states. Some research findings⁴ reinforce that partnerships have an important part in the creation of social capital, moreover in its utilization as a resource. It is considered that social capital is increasing through partnership and so the efficiency of such type of rural development programmes is improved. On the other hand, other research projects⁵ prove that endogenous development programmes based on partnership advance those who have already had appropriate social capital and capacity.

The other essential soft social factor of successful partnership arrangements is cooperation. It seems that in the Western societies cooperation can be arranged much easier, partners recognise their common interests faster and people are more

¹ See e.g. Bristow et al., 2008; Geddes, 2000; Hayward et al., 2004; Lowndes et al., 2001; Shortall, 2004; Derksen-Bock, 2009; Taylor 2000.

² E.g. Buller, 2000; Kovách, 2000; Kull, 2009; Scott, 2004; Shortall 2008; Shucksmith, 2000; Storey, 1999; Thuesen, 2010.

³ E.g. Füzér et al., 2005; Giczi – Sik, 2009; Hankiss, 1989; Kulcsár, 2006; Skrabski – Kopp, 2008; Szakál, 2006.

⁴ E.g. Katonáné, 2006; Kis, 2006b; ÖIR, 2004.

⁵ E.g. Shucksmith, 2000.

willing to place their individual ideas into the service of communal interests. In the East-Central-European societies, after the decades of socialism and centrally planned economy, it is difficult to implement cooperation like this.

1.3. The aims and hypotheses of dissertation

At the very beginning of the research the following **aims** were drafted in relation to the examination of local rural development partnerships.

Objective 1: to make a survey about the characteristics of local rural development partnerships concerning gender, school qualification and composition of sphere representation. Although LEADER-type initiatives have been operated in Hungary for a decade, the Local Action Groups consisting of public, civil and business sphere representatives have been only slightly examined on the basis of the above aspects.

Objective 2: to reveal whether local rural development partnerships really fulfil the EU directives concerning the active participation of local actors and their involvement in decision-making.

Objective 3: to survey whether local partnerships really contribute to the building up of social capital of local community and the development of cooperative willingness, thus enhancing more efficient utilization of available resources, improvement of exploitation of development opportunities, in other words the successful operation of partnership.

Objective 4: to classify Hungarian LEADER Local Action Groups on the basis of social dimensions of partnerships.

Objective 5: to survey the professional satisfaction with partnership activities and to determine whether there is a relationship between the professional satisfaction of partners and their social characteristics.

Prior to the research the following **hypotheses** related to rural development partnerships were set up.

Hypothesis 1: working in partnership often does not result in real participation of partners. Most of the partners typically would not exploit all the possibilities of participating in partnership actions.

Hypothesis 2: local partnerships often preserve the power inequalities among local actors. The stronger interest groups often get into dominant position in local partnerships. The partners possessing less power are mostly not able to enforce

their interest properly in decision-making and get into peripheral position in local partnerships.

Hypothesis 3: partnership actions favour mainly those partners of local community, who already have more social capital and better cooperation skills.

Hypothesis 4: local rural development partnerships can be distinguished and classified on the basis of participative, activity, cooperative, trust and power characteristics.

Hypothesis 5: in the local rural development partnerships the professional satisfaction of partners correlates significantly with their activity, participative, cooperative, trust and power characteristics. In those local partnerships in which the above mentioned social characteristics of membership are favourable, the members are more satisfied than in those where these are unfavourable.

1.4. The theoretical background of the research

In my research work local partnerships will be surveyed in terms of five operation dimensions:

1. participation;
2. activity;
3. power-sharing and involvement in decisions;
4. social capital;
5. cooperation.

These dimensions have been drafted on the basis of works of Böhm (1996), Farkas (2002) and Kulcsár (2006) dealing with the analysis of local society.

The dimensions actually cover the quality degrees of social organisation of partnership. It is necessary to have progress in these dimensions for the development of partnership and more effective operation. The dimensions are closely related to each other; even there can be some overlapping, so their separation would be a bit problematic.

The participative characteristics of partners in the drafting of local development strategy, partnership meetings, different events and tenders are examined within participation dimension. Beside participation frequency of members, the activity of partners in partnership actions also determines the efficient operation of partnership. If too many members are inactive, then the partnership may become inoperative.

The involvement and power-sharing within partnership is also tightly connected with participation. Social inclusion and power are not used in this dissertation in a conventional way. First of all I examine the opinion of which

partners is really considered, who is in dominant position and who is in peripheral position, since they have no right of intervention in the planning and implementation of local development strategy and in important decisions.

The intensity of participation is related to the extent of social capital of partners as well. The larger is the social capital the partners possess, the bigger is their participation willingness. Within the social capital dimension primarily the personal trust among partners is examined. The social capital puts the other dimensions in a frame, since the activity, involvement and power-sharing of local actors cannot be realized without it.

The social capital influences the cooperative willingness as well, since only forced associations can be built without the trust among partners. Within cooperation dimension, I study mainly the cooperative willingness within the partnership and with the superior authorities – Steering Authority and Paying Agency. Moreover it is also examined how the partnership actions have contributed to the development of cooperation of local community, according to the members.

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

2.1. The process of data collection

In the frame of a preliminary research in 2011, interviews were made with leaders of project management offices of LEADER Local Action Groups (hereinafter called LAG) in Central Hungary and the Southern Transdanubia regions in order to learn the features of rural development partnerships and organisational problems. Parallel with the interviews, quantitative data were also collected in the LEADER management offices in Southern Transdanubia and Northern Great Plain regions⁶. It was primarily examined how the partnerships contributed to the moderation of local problems and what changes in local rural development strategies are needed to achieve further social-economic development in the examined micro-regions. These explorative research projects helped to decide what means and techniques should be employed in the course of further examinations of LEADER partnerships. The data collection methods employed later can be seen on Figure 1.

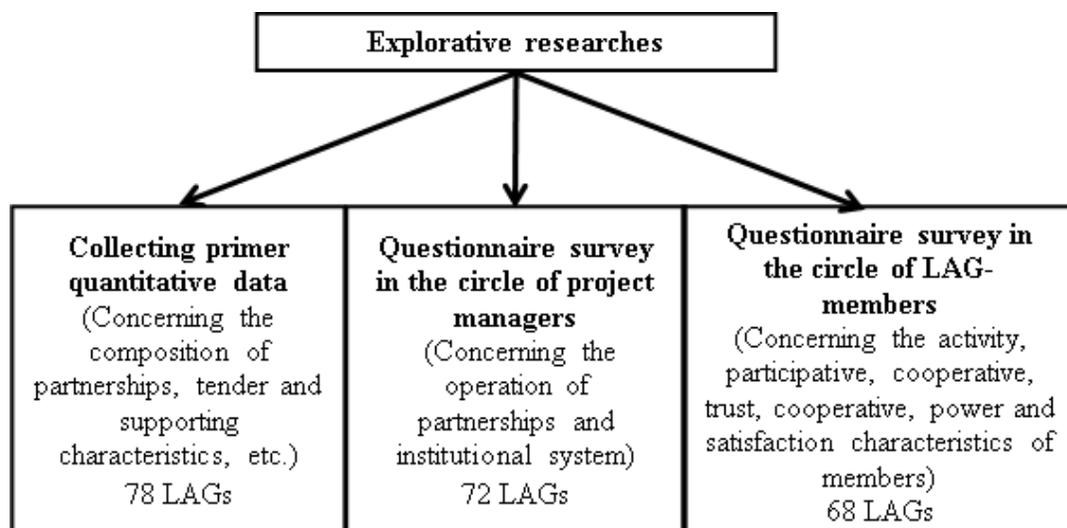


Figure 1: The process of data collection

Source: own edition, 2011

⁶ The seven LAGs: Dél-Baranya Határmenti Települések Egyesülete, Felső-Tisza Völgye Vidékfejlesztési Egyesület, Közép-Nyírségért és Rétközért Vidékfejlesztési Közhasznú Egyesület, Mecsek-Völgség-Hegyhát Egyesület, Rinya-Dráva Szövetség Egyesület, Szatmár LEADER Közhasznú Egyesület, Vidékünk a Jövőnk Szövetség.

2.2. Mathematical and statistical methods applied in the research

The data processing was made by using statistical and index-constructural methods (Figure 2), applying SPSS and Microsoft Excel programmes. To examine first the data structure single variable tests were employed. Beside frequency distribution, different measures of central tendency (e.g. mean, mode, median), dispersion (e.g. range, standard deviation) and other indicators (e.g. minimum, maximum and sum) were calculated depending on which level the variables were measured. *Cross-tabulation* was used for the examination of relations among nominal and ordinal variables listed in the survey of members of Local Action Groups. The relations among metric variables of the fact sheet completed by leaders of administrative organizations and the relations among indexes produced from variables of the questionnaires of LAG-members were analysed by correlation-calculations. The most similar Local Action Groups based on partnership indexes were classified by cluster analysis. Finally multivariable regression was applied in order to decide how the five examined partnership indexes explain the professional satisfaction of LAG-members.

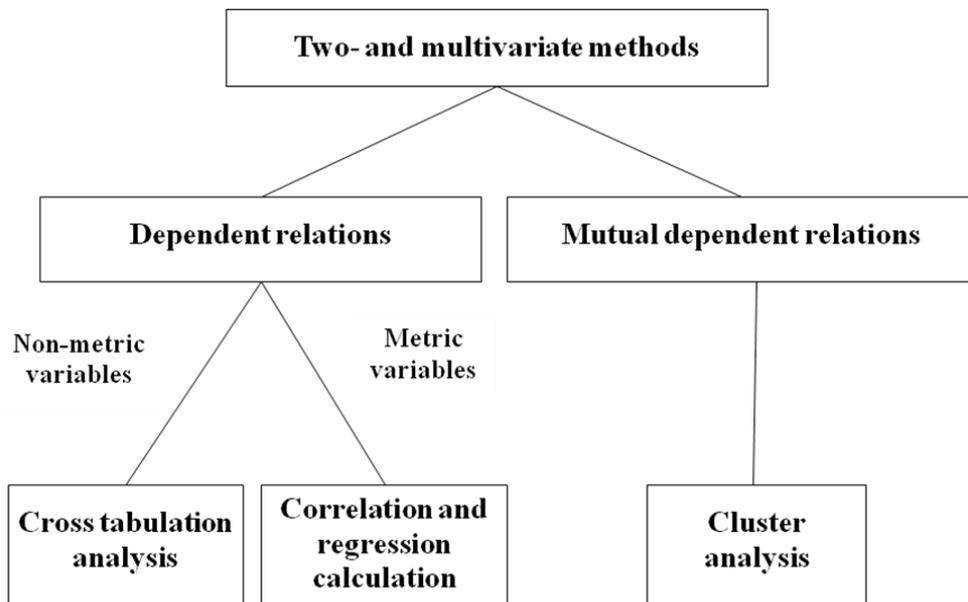


Figure 2: The applied statistical methods

Source: own editing, 2011

Indexes from variables of questionnaire completed by LAG-members were constructed in order to analyse variable groups related to the characterization of each problems together. Two formulas were applied depending on the type of

variable for the calculation of part-indexes concerning Action Groups. In case of ordinal level the following formula was used for calculating part-indexes:

$$I_{ij} = \frac{\sum x_{ij} - x_{i\min} * n}{(x_{i\max} - x_{i\min}) * n}$$

where: $\sum X_{ij}$ = the total score of the received answers for the given question regarding the examined LAG

$X_{i\min}$ = the minimum score of the answer that can be given for the question

$X_{i\max}$ = the maximum score of the answer that can be given for the question

n = the number of answers for the given question regarding the examined LAG

In case of nominal scale the formulas were modified, since such types of questions has two possible outputs: 0 (meaning: no) or 1 (meaning: yes), so both the numerator and the denominator of the above formula is simplified.

$$I_{ij} = \frac{\sum x_{ij}}{n}$$

where: $\sum X_{ij}$ = the total score of the received answers for the given question regarding the examined LAG

n= the number of answers for the given question regarding the examined LAG .

Each part-index is between 0 and 1. While 0 means that the examined attitude is not typical at all for the given partnership, 1 means that it is completely characteristic of it. The part-indexes were not weighted, because each of them was considered equally important. Finally, each index was determined as a mean of part-indexes calculated on the basis of answers for the belonging questions. The following six indexes were created. The Participation Index (PAI) includes the participative characteristics of LAG-members. The Activity Index (AI) demonstrates how actively the members take part in the work of LAG. The Trust Index (TI) shows the extent of trust among LAG-members. The Cooperation Index (CI) contains the characteristics of cooperative willingness of LAG-members. The Power to Enforce Interest Index (POI) presents how the interests of respondents and spheres have been taken into consideration in the course of planning and implementation of development strategy. The Satisfaction Index (SI) implies the professional satisfaction characteristics of the members.

It was regarded inevitable to consider the opinion of each sphere. Therefore only those partnerships were analysed where at least two local governments, two civil organizations and two entrepreneurs answered the questionnaire appreciably. 51 partnerships met these demands as it can be seen on Figure 3.

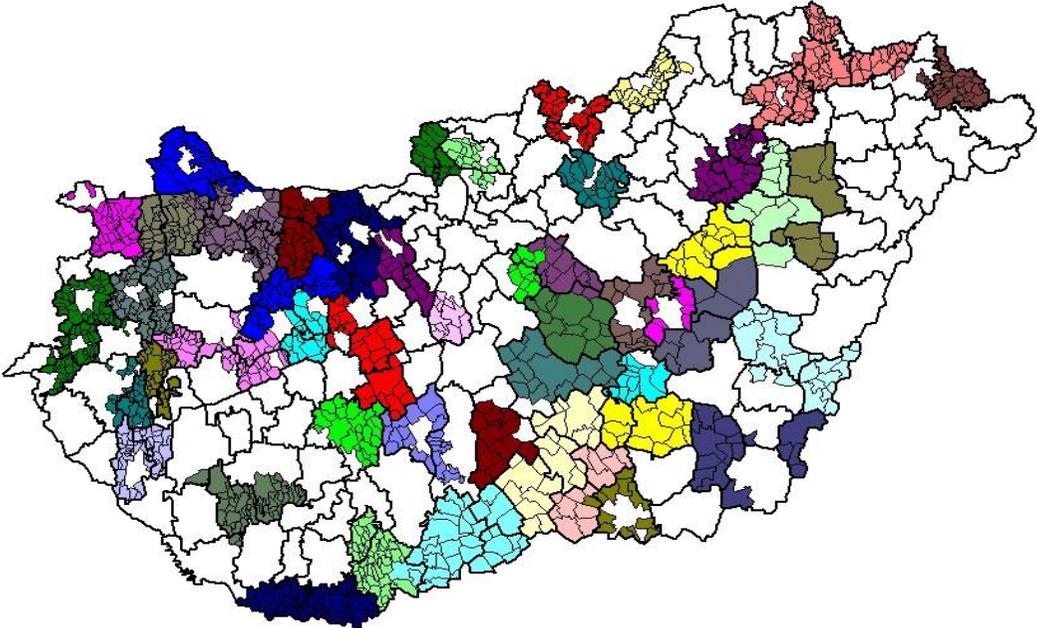


Figure 3: LEADER Local Action Groups examined by indexes
Source: own editing, 2011

3. RESULTS

3.1. The characteristics of LEADER partnerships participating in the research

In spite of the fact that in 2008 altogether ninety-six NHRDP LEADER Action Groups were established by registering some twelve thousand organisations, still there is only little information regarding their composition. Since partly partners decide about the strategic development plan of the given rural areas and they have key role in distributing EU public funds it seems to be important to examine who are the members of the partnerships.

The examined LAGs altogether include 2321 settlements that is seventy-seven per cent of settlements which are entitled to participate in the LEADER programme. The partnerships contain thirty settlements on the average, but the standard deviation is quite large. There are LAGs composed of four settlements, but there are some which involve more than 80 settlements.

The 78 Local Action Groups participating in the survey had altogether 6885 members on 1st September 2011. Similarly to the number of settlements, the difference is big among partnerships regarding the number of members as well. While the smallest one, the Homokhátság Fejlődéséért Közhasznú Nonprofit Kft. has only 10 members, the largest one, the Szatmár Közhasznú Egyesület has 276 members. On the average the partnerships consist of 90 members.

There is a significant, strong, positive relation ($r=0.81$) between the number of partners and settlements based on correlation calculation. It means that in those LAGs where the number of settlements is high, the number of members is also high. Three persons represent a settlement on the average in the LEADER associations.

The distribution of members according to spheres is largely similar, only the representatives of the business sector are overrepresented a little bit (34.7%). There were eight partnerships among the examined LAGs where the proportion of public sphere exceeded forty percent. These were primarily Action Groups where only a few members represented each settlement. The proportion of civil organizations also exceeded forty percent in eight Action Groups. In these LAGs the proportion of representatives of entrepreneurs was mostly low. The business sphere representatives were dominant mainly in the partnerships of Northern and Southern Great Plain regions. Territorial correlations, however, were not found in the case of the other spheres.

Examining the distribution of representatives of members regarding gender, it can be stated that the males are in majority (72%) in the membership. There are only two partnerships – GERJE-SZTÓK Helyi Vidékfejlesztési Közösség Egyesület és a Pannónia Kincse LEADER Egyesület – in the examined sample where the female representatives are prevailing. There are some local associations where the proportion of female representatives does not reach even ten percent.

The management organisations could not provide data at all about the school qualification of representatives, since most of them did not have official records about this. The membership is often so extended that most of the partners have only superficial knowledge about the others and nothing about the qualification of other partners. It was proved that in certain boards, such as in the planning and the decision maker boards, members with college or university degrees are prevailing.

3.2. The characterization of LAG-members based on partnership dimensions

Participation in the LEADER partnerships

For the sustainability of partnership it is essential that its members participate in the LAG work and the handling of problems. Therefore, I think it is necessary to examine the participative characteristics of partners in planning, decisions, meetings, different events and tenders.

If partners do not participate in the drafting of development plans, then its measures and the real development needs of partners may differ significantly. Therefore, it is important that more and more partners would contribute with their ideas to the strategy. In most of the Action Groups, however, the participation willingness in composition of development strategy was quite low according to the survey. Only one third of the respondents contributed to the development plan with their ideas or opinions.

Although the majority of respondents stated that new tender possibilities had an essential part in their accession to Action Group, only two-fifth of the members submitted applications in the first two rounds of NHRDP Axis III. The majority of members gave three reasons for their passivity in application. A part of them said that failed to submit application due to the lack of time. Another part explained his passivity with the changes in his financial circumstances. The third group declared that the local development strategy did not match with the development needs of his region because of the bureaucratic regulations and conventional planning, for this reason he did not write project proposal.

While more than half of the representatives of the public sphere (56%) wrote application in the first two rounds of NHRDP Axis III, less than one-third of the civil and business sphere representatives did so. Probably it had an essential part in this tendency that most of the tender titles were key development target areas for most of local governments. Moreover, the local governments possessed the appropriate human capacity and the own financial resources needed for project proposals. The tenders supported by NHRDP Axis III had relatively large budget⁷,

⁷ The average amount per application was 16.44 million forint in the case of Axis III.

therefore higher amount of own sources were required which could not be ensured by civil organizations or with more difficulties than by the local governments.

Thirty-seven percent of the respondents submitted proposals in frame of the first round of NHRDP Axis IV (LEADER). The activity in LEADER proposals had significant relation to neither the school qualification, nor the sphere representation. This feature can be explained by the fact that the budget of proposals in case of Axis IV was smaller. Therefore smaller own financial sources were required for their implementation, so unlike Axis III, the local actors with less financial sources could submit proposals as well.

The survey has revealed that the participative willingness of members in meetings and other events was low as well. One-tenth of partners had never attended meetings and one-fifth did it only rarely. The participation at other events – like forums for informing citizens, gatherings and trainings – was even lower than at the meetings. While one-third of the respondents attended rarely, five percent have never been to any event yet. The latter ratio is better than the participation rate at the meetings.

Prior to the research it was assumed that the participative willingness was higher in the smaller Action Groups, because in these LAGs it was easier to inform the members about the possibilities of participation, find such occasions when the majority of members can be presented at the meetings and support partners in preparing proposals. However, there was no significant relation between the size of Action Group and the participative willingness of members on the basis of correlation analysis. Nevertheless it was proved in the course of research that those members, who had shown larger participative willingness in certain above mentioned activity, took part more intensively in the other fields of partnership actions, too.

Activity in the LEADER partnerships

Beside the participative willingness of LAG-members, I regarded it important to study their activity characteristics, because - according to the data of special literature - the participation of those members in partnership actions, who are only passive observers and do not work for the successful operation of partnership, is pointless. The participation of inactive members is in fact dispensable, since they contribute only with their membership fee to the operation of Action Group, but the findings show that even these members often have overdue payment.

Almost two-third of the respondents considered himself active participants. On the other hand, twenty-eight percent stated that they took part rather in passive way. Some of them said that they were passive because of lack of time, others accounted for apathy. According to the third group of respondents the partnership do not operate appropriately because only a narrow group's interests were taken into consideration during the decision-making processes. So they consider

themselves peripheral members and cannot see the point of participating more actively due to their disappointment.

Almost one-tenth of those who completed the questionnaire did not take part in the decision-making of Action Groups and the implementation of regional development strategy at all. Most of these members stated that they did not care the collective interests, but they joined the partnership for personal reasons. They became partners mainly in order to be well informed regarding on-going events and developments occurring within the regions, but they did not want to participate in the collective work.

Slightly more than one-tenth of the respondents from the public sector stated that they were passive observers or they did not participate at all in partnership actions. Almost forty percent of respondents had the same opinion regarding representatives of civil organisations and sixty percent of partners considered the representatives of the business sector inactive. So the respondents think the local governments were the most active, the civil sphere was on the second place and the entrepreneurs seemed to be the least active participants.

Cooperation in the LEADER partnerships

The existing relations influence the operation of partnership. The conflicts among local actors are perhaps the most important hindering factors in the course of joint work. The efficiency of development based on local partnerships largely depends on the cooperative willingness of partners. Therefore, the cooperation characteristics among Action Groups, within the partnership and among the members and superior authorities (Steering Authority and Paying Agency) were analysed in the research work. Moreover, the opinion of respondents regarding the contribution of LAG operation to the development of cooperation of local community is also reviewed.

Eighty percent of the examined Action Groups cooperated with another national LAG. But only every other LEADER partnership participates in international cooperation. According to the survey the partnerships share information, experiences and results, give opinion on legislation drafts, agendas, consult with each other about the interpretation of regulations in the frame of cooperation. Besides, more Action Groups elaborated common projects, appeared together in regional and national programmes, exhibitions, promoted the products of each other, even some of them mentioned that they organised common trainings for the new colleagues.

The cooperative willingness among members was judged favourably in most of the LAGs, only twenty-seven percent of the members stated that it was weak or there was not any cooperation within the partnership. The leaders of management offices spoke even more positively about the cooperative willingness among members; only one-fifth stated that the cooperation was weak.

The respondents appreciated the cooperative willingness among Action Groups and management offices even better than within partnership, hardly more than one-tenth of the members reported on the lack of cooperation. The leaders of management offices had similar opinions.

According to the majority of respondents the cooperative willingness among the Action Group and the superior authorities (Steering Authority and Paying Agency) is also definitely favourable. Those respondents were unsatisfied with the cooperation who stated the relations among the authorities and the Action Groups were one-sided, because the LAGs were in subordinate position. These respondents miss the meaningful negotiation, the possibilities of expressing of their opinion, they say that *'the socialization of legislation is only ostensible'*. Local partnerships *'have become empty, only administrative tasks are managed by the organizations'*, *'the upper levels determine the scope of actions of LAGs in a dictatorial way'*. The concerned heads of management offices say that more dialogues, two-sided communication and larger compromise skills would be necessary. The Steering Authority should look at Action Groups as partners not only at rhetoric levels, but also in practice instead of the sub- and superordinate relation.

The results of the survey show that according to the prevailing majority of members the work of Action Group really contributed to the improvement of cooperation of the local community. Hardly more than one-tenth of the members and out of the management offices only the leader of Duna Összeköt Egyesület stated that the partnership did not foster the cooperation of local community. In the latter Action Group the cooperative willingness among members proved to be quite weak, the partners give priority to their individual interests instead of the collective interests.

The majority of LAG-members and leaders of management offices considered that the partners were motivated for internal and external cooperation. In general the members were able to place collective interests in front of individual interests. Those LAGs where the cooperative skills were lower explained this feature mainly with three reasons:

- a) The traditions of community cooperation are missing in the region, most of the partners have not known each other before setting-up the LAG, and therefore the trust needed for cooperation have not emerged yet.
- b) The conflicts among members make the cooperation impossible. A narrow group monopolizes the LAG for own purposes and so the cooperation with them makes no sense for other partners.
- c) The members have lost their motivations for cooperation due to the bureaucratic barriers and legislation which have made their operation impossible. They feel they invested money, time, and energy in vain, and they received nothing in return.

Trust in the LEADER partnerships

Social capital has an essential part in the successful operation of partnerships. Trust enables cooperation, so without it the implementation of local development strategy can be in danger. In the course of the research work the personal trust among partners was examined, but the general trust was not. The respondents assessed the trust among members, how much they kept their promises and how they could rely on fellows when problems arose.

According to the majority of partners participating in the research the personal trust was strong inside the Action Group, only one-fourth stated that the trust among members was weak or totally missing. More than three-fourth of the members stated the partners kept their promises. The overwhelming majority of respondents feel that they can really rely on the others in case of any problems. Hardly one-fifth felt that the partners would not help if needed.

Power to enforce interests in the LEADER partnerships

The local representatives of public, civil and business sphere are participating in much the same proportion in the NHRDP Local Action Groups. Although in smaller proportion, but the weaker groups of local society such as women or young persons who were excluded earlier took also part in the partnership. It is not enough, however, to provide equal participation only in terms of number, because it is a general tendency that the local political elite or other smaller interest groups got into dominant position in the course of decision-making.

More than one fifth of respondents stated that their ideas were somehow considered, one-tenth said that their suggestions were altogether rejected during planning. I revealed the reasons why their ideas were left out from the development strategy. A narrow group of respondents did never want to participate in planning because of their other engagements, they did not feel obliged to participate in collective work. These respondents were mainly the representatives of the business sphere. They decided on their own that they would not take part in the development of strategy. Others – due to the communication problems inside the Action Group - were not informed in time about the cooperation possibilities in planning, so they were left out. The third part of respondents were informed about what happened in the LAG, but owing to the lack of time for planning, there were no attempts to involve them in the creation of development strategy. According to them the management office in cooperation with external experts elaborated the development strategy of the region. The fourth group of respondents stated that ‘*planning was internal*’, which referred to the fact that the interests of a narrower group inside the partnership consisting of local governments prevailed, who ‘*were hostile*’ with every idea coming from other local actors. Two-third of the respondents belonging to the fourth group was civil and one third represented the entrepreneurs in the Action Group.

Less than half of the respondents have the opinion that the ideas of all the actors were equally taken into consideration during strategy drafting. However, the other half thought that the representatives of one of the spheres prevailed in the planning process. More than forty percent of the members who completed the questionnaire said that the public sphere dominated, six percent told that the civil organizations and eight percent stated that the entrepreneurs dominated in the construction of local development strategy.

Similar results were received concerning the decision-making process about partnership. One third of the members stated that they could not enforce their interests properly in the course of decision-making. Some of the partners stated that they were left out from decision-making due to bad timing of LAG-meetings. Those belonged to the other group, who took part at the meetings, but could not really influence the decisions. They acknowledged that they became peripheral partners, since a narrow elite group monopolised their Action Group.

The domination of spheres in decisions gives an even more unfavourable picture than in case of planning processes. More than half of the respondents thought that the local governments, seven percent says that entrepreneurs, and five percent feels that civil organisations dominate in decision-making. Hardly one third of the respondents were in the opinion that all the three spheres had equal influence on decisions.

3.3. Grouping LAGs

In the next phase of the research the fifty-one Action Groups were clustered on the basis of the examined social dimensions (participation, activity, trust, cooperation and power to enforce interest indexes). I was inquiring whether the partnerships were totally heterogeneous and all of them could be only separately developed based on their own characteristics or a more homogenous structure could be elaborated in order to facilitate the determination of areas to be developed. The classification was accomplished by cluster analysis. The four clusters can be seen on Figure 4.

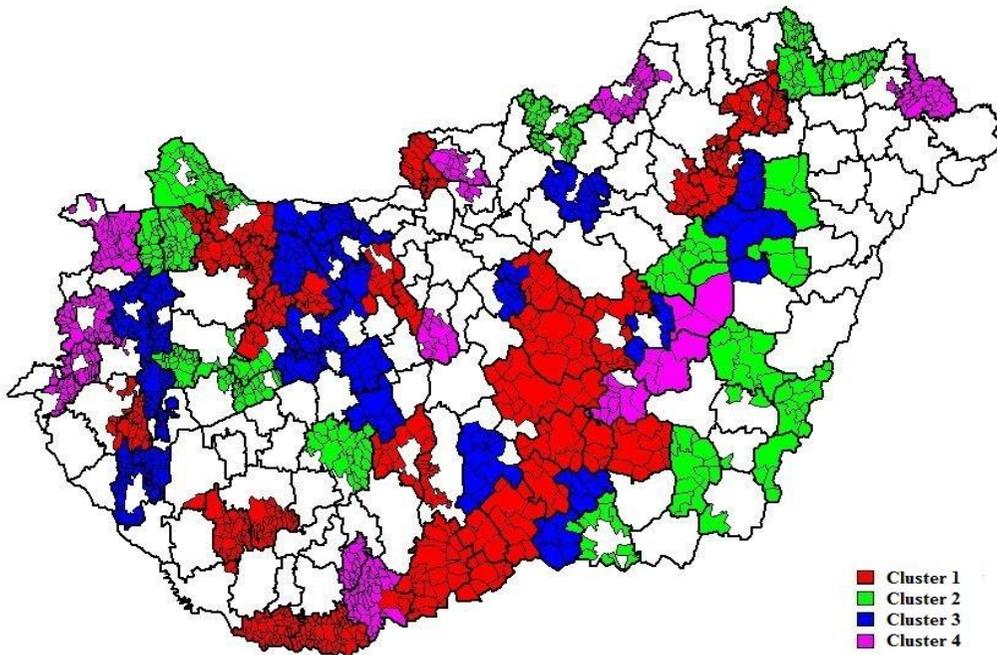


Figure 4: The classification of the selected LAGs

Source: own calculation and editing, 2011

Action Groups belonging to the first cluster had extreme points along negative values in the cases of all the five partnership dimensions. Therefore, this group was named ‘*weakly-operating, underdeveloped partnerships*’. The following development objectives can be set up in these LEADER regions:

- to improve the participation willingness of members at meetings, different events of the LAG and local tenders,
- to urge the activity of members from all the spheres,
- to involve partners from much wider sectors in the implementation of development strategies and balance power to enforce interests during decision-making,
- to improve cooperation skills inside the partnership and with superior authorities,
- to strengthen personal trust among partners.

Action Groups belonging to the second cluster had extreme points along positive values in the cases of all the examined partnership dimensions. Therefore, this group was named ‘*well-operating partnerships*’. The most important aims in the cases of Action Groups belonging to the second cluster are the followings:

- to increase the proportion of participation in local tenders, mainly to strengthen the activity in LEADER Axis proposals,
- to improve the activity of business sphere in partnership actions,

- to put more emphasis on the equal power of spheres to enforce interests in the course of decision making,
- to maintain trust and cooperative willingness among members by e.g. trainings, community meetings, organising programmes, etc..

As regards partnerships belonging to the third cluster the participative willingness was low, the activity was medium, the intent to cooperate with fellow members was good and the trust was strong. Therefore this group was named '*partnerships characterized by low participative willingness, but strong social capital*'. The most important goals in case of Action Groups belonging to the third cluster are the followings:

- to improve the participative willingness within partnership in the work of LAG, the different programmes and proposal submission in the frame of NHRDP Axis III.,
- to urge passive partners to participate in a meaningful way,
- to develop the cooperative skill with Steering Authority and Paying Agency.

In Action Groups belonging to the fourth cluster the participative willingness was higher in comparison to the others, the activity was medium, the cooperative willingness was small and the personal trust among members was weak. Therefore, this group was named '*partnerships characterized by high participative willingness, but small social capital*'. The most important goals are the followings in case of partnerships belonging to the fourth cluster:

- to improve the activity of civil and business sphere members,
- to moderate the dominance of public sphere, improve the ability of representatives of civil and business spheres to enforce their interests,
- to develop the cooperation skills among members as well as with Steering Authority and Paying Agency,
- to further strengthen personal trust among members.

3.4. Satisfaction characteristics of LAG-members

In the last phase of the research the professional satisfaction of partners was studied. On the one hand, the satisfaction of partners with partnership work was examined; on the other hand it was surveyed how much pleasure the respondents found in partnership working. Finally, the satisfaction with professional results of LAG was analysed.

Almost two-third of the respondents was satisfied with their work in partnership on the basis of the survey. However, one-fourth of the members were mainly unsatisfied and one-tenth was not at all satisfied with their partnership

work. The respondents were even more satisfied with the professional results of partnership, since only one-fifth stated he was displeased. The overwhelming majority of members usually found pleasure in partnership work, but twenty percent did not usually enjoy work.

To examine which partnership index had the largest influence on the professional satisfaction of members and the Satisfaction Index (SI) how much depended on the company of the five partnership index, multivariable regression was applied. The weight of activity index was the largest one (beta=0,467), so the activity of members had the biggest effect on the satisfaction of partners. The Trust Index (TI) was on the second place (beta=0,345) and the Power to enforce Interest Index (POI) on the third place (beta=0,306). The standardised coefficients of Participation Index and Cooperation Index were very low, the significance level of t-probe referred to the fact that these indicators did not actually play part in the formation of Satisfaction Index. The following regression model was elaborated based on the non-standardized coefficients:

$$\mathbf{SI = 0,64*AI + 0,36*TI+ 0,26*POI}$$

It means that mainly those partners were satisfied with the professional work of members and results who were active, who felt that they could enforce their interests in decision making and implementation of development strategy and had trust in other partners. On the other hand, those who were passive felt that their opinion was not taken into consideration, could not trust other partners and were unsatisfied with LAG from professional point of view.

3.5. New and novel scientific results

1. The first novel result is the structured presentation of the literature related to local partnerships fitting into governance research approach.
2. The already known feature from governance literature - that the partnership work does not often result in real, meaningful participation of members - was proved by statistical methods in case of NHRDP LEADER initiative. Most of the partners did not utilize the participation possibilities provided by the LEADER programme.
3. It was confirmed that the NHRDP LEADER partnerships instead of reducing the existing power inequalities among local actors, preserve them in Action Groups.
4. Five new partnership indexes – the Participation, the Activity, the Trust, the Cooperation and the Power to Enforce Interest Indexes – were elaborated with the help of statistical and mathematical methods in order to examine the social dimensions of local partnerships.
5. Cluster analysis was applied and the examined LEADER Local Action Groups were classified in four groups by using different methods. The clusters were named the following way:
 1. weakly-operating, underdeveloped partnerships;
 2. well-operating partnerships;
 3. partnerships characterized by low participative willingness, but strong social capital;
 4. partnerships characterized by high participative willingness, but small social capital.

These four clusters present special types of partnership, which require different development strategy. However, the local partnerships belonging to the same group can be developed in a uniform way.

6. To analyse the professional satisfaction of partners a new indicator, the Satisfaction Index was developed. It was found by means of multivariable linear regression that the professional satisfaction of partners was influenced substantially by the Activity, the Trust and the Power to Enforce Interests Indexes.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. Confirmation or rejection of starting hypotheses

As regards the hypotheses drafted on the basis of the special literature two were confirmed partly and three completely with the help of the applied statistical and mathematical methods. I have stated that in case of most of the LEADER partnerships the participation willingness was low both in the course of planning and implementing the development strategy. More than one-third of the respondents do not or rarely take part at LAG meetings and different gatherings, exhibitions, forums and training courses. I have examined the features of participation from the aspects of quantity as well as quality. I have revealed that more than one-third of the respondents are inactive in partnerships. According to the majority of partners, the representatives of the entrepreneurs are the most passive in LAG work out of the three sectors, but the representatives of the other two sectors are not active enough, either. **The above results concerning the participation and activity of members prove my first hypothesis, according to which the work in partnership does not always end in real and actual involvement of partners.**

Examining the distribution of members, I have stated that the equal participation in the membership of the Hungarian action groups could be ensured only in case of three spheres. Equal participation could not be reached regarding genders and school qualifications because strong male dominance can be seen in most of the action groups and the different committees. As regards school qualification, those with college or university degrees are prevailing. The results were not very favourable when I examined how the opinions of weaker social groups are considered in planning and implementing the development strategies. Although the equal participation of different spheres is ensured in local partnerships, but more than half of the respondents say that the opinion of the representatives of one sector – mainly the local governments – dominate in decision-making. Many of the respondents complain that the local political elite or the organisation itself monopolizes the partnership for its own purposes. **The results of the research confirm my second hypothesis, according to which the action groups instead of reducing the power inequality, often conserve it. The stronger interest groups are often prevailing in the local partnerships. Weaker partners in these groups cannot enforce their interests in decision-making and thus they get into peripheral situation in local partnerships.**

The work in partnerships has contributed to the development of social capital in all the action groups but not equally for each partner. The local political elite have greater power in partnerships – due perhaps mainly to the greater social capital - than the other social groups. It has been proved in the research that the trust among the members of the public sector is much stronger than in case of the civil or business sector. The cooperation willingness within the partnership,

however, is not significantly related to the sphere representation. **So the results prove that the work in partnership is advantageous primarily for those members of the local community who already have more social capital. I could not prove, however, my assumption concerning the cooperation willingness, so my third hypothesis was confirmed only partly.**

The LEADER partnerships were classified on the basis of their participation, activity, involvement, cooperation and interest-enforcing indexes. The four clusters that I made included Action Groups with different social characteristics which require different development strategies. The first cluster refers to those partnerships which produced the worst values in all the examined dimensions. In my opinion, the participation willingness and activity of all the three spheres, as well as the weak trust among them should be enforced in this group. The cooperation willingness within the partners and the superior authorities should also be significantly improved. The second cluster contains those action groups which have the best values in all the dimensions. As regards this group, mostly the current state should be maintained and only a few areas – e.g. the participation of members in project proposals and the activity of entrepreneurs – should be improved. The third cluster includes those partnerships where the participation willingness of members is relatively low but the trust is strong and the cooperation willingness is good among those who are willing to participate. In this group the passive members should be encouraged and the partners should be more intensively involved in decision-making processes and implementation of development strategies. The fourth cluster includes those partnerships where the participation willingness of members is relatively high, but they do not trust each other therefore their cooperation willingness is not adequate either. In this case, mainly the social capital should be built up, which is a very time-consuming process. On the basis of this, **I consider my fourth hypothesis proved, because it was confirmed that the local partnerships can be distinguished and classified on the basis of partnership indexes.**

Similarly to the third hypothesis, **my fifth hypothesis could be confirmed only partly. On the basis of regression calculations, only three out of the five examined partnership indexes has actual impact on the professional satisfaction of members concerning the partnership.** It means that the partners are more satisfied in those partnerships where the activity, trust and interest-enforcing characteristics of members are better than in those action groups where the members are passive, the personal trust is weak and the interest-enforcing ability of members is low. **The participation and cooperation features, however, do not actually affect the satisfaction of members.**

4.2. Further conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions and recommendations concerning the participation and activity of partners

LEADER action groups should be based on the real participation of local people, but the research has revealed that the participation willingness of members is very low in most of the partnerships and even if they attend meetings, their activation is often problematic and their attention cannot be maintained. I have experienced manipulative or passive participation in many partnerships, as it is mentioned in the references.

The so-called non-participation by Hayward is a typical phenomenon in some of the examined partnerships. In this case the rational decision of members is the lack of participation. Most of them joined the partnership not in the interest of the community but rather for personal reasons. They often become partners in order to be well-informed concerning the local development and fund-raising possibilities but they do not actually want to participate in the work of the partnership.

In spite of the above mentioned problems, the LEADER program still ensures more extended and deeper involvement of local actors than the top-down directed rural development projects but it would be advisable to further deepen and widen the participation. I consider it important to define those who totally reject cooperation within the partnership. When the reasons of their passivity are explored, it can be decided whether it is worth working on their activation. In case of those who totally reject cooperation, it is not worth further encouraging their involvement in the partnership. But the participation of those should be facilitated who show at least some minimum willingness to cooperate and have been absent only for the lack of trust or some other personal reasons.

The activity of members is significantly affected by the personality of local leaders and their ability to stimulate their partners. Therefore, in my opinion, the management competencies should be improved through training courses.

Conclusions and recommendations concerning the sharing of power within the partnership

The research results have led to the conclusion that in the Hungarian LEADER practice, the local partnerships serve the interest of those who already have greater power in the rural regions. As regards the development projects based on partnerships it is inevitable that all the people concerned participate in the decision-making process. Involving the partners who are in marginal situation in the decision-making takes more time because the power relations can be changed only slowly. Targeted interventions and capacity building is needed in the

partnerships. The improvement of relations between partners and the development of new norms should be encouraged as well as the communication between members should be enhanced. I think that – similarly to the Western-European practice - it would be important to employ animators in the concerned action groups in order to improve the community-building force of partnerships.

Conclusions and recommendations concerning the cooperation willingness of partners and the trust among them

The low cooperation willingness of partners can basically be led back to three reasons. On the one hand, the traditions of community cooperation are often missing in the examined regions. Most of the LAG members have not even known each other before the foundation of the partnership and thus the trust required for cooperation has not evolved yet. On the other hand, the conflicts between members can also often hamper cooperation. Thirdly, part of the members has lost their inner motivation to cooperate due to the bureaucratic obstacles which make the operation of the partnership unviable.

It would be advisable in the future to give higher priority to cooperation, because it would enhance local activity, stimulate more efficient utilisation of local resources and more efficient handling of local problems. In my opinion, the cooperation should be encouraged in four areas: the cooperation willingness among partners should be increased, the cooperation with external authorities should also be improved, the international cooperation between action groups should be extended and the projects targeting the cooperation should be prioritized in the frames of NHRDP Axis IV applications.

The lack of international cooperation is usually explained by the lack of financial resources, but the research results proved that in many cases there is not even the slightest need in LAG members to participate in international cooperation. Most of the Action Groups do not give any priority to build up international cooperation. It should be taught to the members that joint conferences and study tours, transfer of good practice and exchange of experiences can considerably enhance the efficient operation of partnerships. In case of borderline action groups, the current cooperation should be made closer.

In the first round of NHRDP Axis IV, only eight percent of awarded LEADER grants were spent on projects which targeted the development of cooperation within and between regions. Therefore much more attention should be given to the support of these types of projects in the next rounds of inviting project proposals.

The quality of cooperation is basically determined by the trust among partners. Hungary belongs to the countries with low level of trust, the trust both in persons and institutions is weak (Giczi-Sik, 2009). My own research has also proved that the downward trust is missing from the system and it prevents the

cooperation between local, regional and national bodies and led to the over-regulation of application system and exaggerated severity towards local level.

Most of the people, however, regarded the personal trust between members within the examined LEADER partnership good. The quantity and quality of contacts between members was not appropriate. Among the weaknesses of Action Groups the heads of management offices often listed the lack of trust between the different sectors and towards the management. Building up trust takes a lot of time but it can be accelerated by increasing the number of personal meetings. More attention should also be given to the introduction of advantages and possibilities of cooperation to the membership.

Conclusions and recommendations concerning the institution system

It is presumed about the local partnerships that due to their flexibility they handle the problems of rural areas more efficiently than the rigid, highly centralized systems. On the basis of the results of literature and empirical research it can be concluded that the LEADER program is centralized in Hungary and the superior authorities do not give up any actual responsibilities to the local actors.

The democratic operation of the national rural development institutional system is only partial, there is not any co-ordinate relation between the different levels because the initiatives are carried out along a hierarchic logic. The institutional system is extremely bureaucratic, slow and hardly transparent. There are often problems with information flow between the institutions, and the cooperation is weak between the management and the local executive branches.

The restructuring of rural development institution system has become necessary. Although some heads of executive branches declared that the situation has improved in the recent year, but further changes are required for the more efficient operation. The over-centralization and bureaucracy should be reduced. More coordination, more dialogues and stronger cooperation among the different levels will be needed in the future. Greater emphasis should be given to the initiatives coming from below. In my opinion, the self-regulation of Local Action Groups should also be enforced and more space should be given to the local partnerships in solving the problems of their own regions in order to enhance successful operation.

5. PUBLICATIONS CONNECTED WITH THE SUBJECT OF DISSERTATION

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