

The role of Local Action Groups in identifying and resolving rural conflicts in Slovenia

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Abstract - Researchers hypothesized that Local Action Groups (LAGs) could play an important role in resolving rural conflicts due to their unique networking status. Namely, they are the only actor in the field that offers tenders for networking projects with fair involvement of the public, private and non-governmental sectors. Through their Local Development Strategies of LEADER program, they provide a professional basis for connecting various municipalities, regional and development agencies, farmers, entrepreneurs, and the non-governmental sector. Their basic mission could be described to be a sub-actor between municipalities and to guide the local inter-municipal development of their region through targeted project financing. With the help of e-surveys among LAGs in Slovenia and in-depth interviews, we explored how the LAGs see their role in resolving inter-municipal spatial conflicts in rural areas. Results suggest that most of LAGs are aware of their capability to perceive rural conflicts and also see themselves as a vital mediator for solving these conflicts. They are aware of their specific networking status that enables them to build a space where an open direct communication with fair involvement of the private, public and non-governmental sector is build.

INTRODUCTION

Rural development in the European Union (EU) countries has been supported by various policy measures and initiatives. One of them is mainstreaming the LEADER approach into development policies in establishing and supporting the local development partnerships in rural development projects in autonomous regional development (Pylkkanen and Hyyrylainen, 2005). The LEADER approach aims at encouraging establishing and supporting local development partnerships between three groups of local actors – civil society, public administration, and private sector – organized as the Local Action Groups (LAGs). These groups are expected to possess a relatively high degree of various intangible forms of capital, especially networking and social capital, which is believed to be the most important for the LAGs (Loštak and Hudečkova 2008).

The countryside is a place of important changes and functions and a space/place for diverse interests. Where areas of different interests overlap, conflicts arise, but on the other hand there can also be mutual benefits. Identifying and coordinating interests is a task of spatial planning and relevant sectoral policies, which necessarily requires cross-sectoral coordination (Golobič et al., 2003).

However, the functions of the rural areas cannot be considered in isolation. There are also interconnected actors who live, work, or just visit the countryside. This in turn leads to interactions that are often perceived as conflicts due to conflicting perceptions and interests (Potočnik Slavič, 2010).

Researchers hypothesized that LAGs could play an important role in resolving rural conflicts due to their unique networking status. Namely, they are the only actor in the field that offers tenders for networking projects with a fair involvement of the public, private and non-governmental sectors. Through their Local Development Strategies (LDS), they provide a

professional basis for connecting various municipalities, regional and development agencies, farmers, entrepreneurs, and the non-governmental sector.

With the help of e-surveys among LAGs in Slovenia and in-depth interviews, we tried to understand if and how the LAG sees its role in resolving inter-municipal spatial conflicts in rural areas.

METHODS

We used quantitative technique – an e-survey and a qualitative technique – in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives of LAGs in Slovenia. The e-survey was sent to all 37 LAGs in Slovenia, and we received complete answers from 18 LAGs.

With further quantitative analysis of these surveys, we defined four criteria by which we identified nine LAGs that would be suitable for an in-depth interview. These criteria were:

- a perception of specific areas/locations where conflicts occur or may occur in the future;
- an experience in adapting the LDS due to expressed actual or potential conflicts;
- an experience in mediating conflicts between members of LAG
- a presence of one's own participation in the conflict as an actor.

Due to COVID restrictions and health issues of certain representatives of LAGs we successfully conducted six in-depth interviews in November 2021, recorded and analysed them with Silverman's method (2001) of interpreting qualitative data using coding technique. We have interviewed LAG Gorenjska košarica (9.11.2021), LAG Loško pogorje (10.11.2021), LAG Dolenjska in Bela krajina (16.11.2021), LAG Haloze (18.11.2021), LAG UE Ormož (19.11.2021) and LAG Notranjska (18.11.2021).

In the interviews, we set eight topics:

- The role of the LAG now and in the future,
- How can a weak communication be a source of conflict?,
- Conflict resolution and the role of LAGs,
- Mediation process,
- Concrete areas and participants in the conflict,
- 'Troublemaker' or a driver of conflict,
- Are potential areas of conflict reflected through changes in local development strategies?,
- Changes in the demographic (D), economic (G) and spatial (P) areas over the last 10 years.

The idea was to get a first-hand views, experiences, and expectations regarding the past, present, and future role of the LAG in its area. We sensibly moved between the topics according to the course of the conversation and deepened the discussion with thematic sub-questions. The interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 1 hour and 20 minutes, with no time limitations.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We found that 14 out of 18 respondents have perceived at least one form of conflict. A qualitative analysis of the results of the e-survey showed that LAGs most often identify a group of conflicts that arise due to *lack of communication* (between residents and municipalities, between natives and newcomers; 10 out of 18 respondents answered YES) and *lack or abolition of public service shops, post offices, ATMs*; (9 out of 18 respondents answered YES). Six LAGs say they also perceive conflicts due to *problems with access to drinking water* and due to *leisure, recreational and sports activities* (mushrooming, cycling, hiking, horseback riding). Other groups of conflicts are identified by LAGs in less than one third of cases. Only three LAGs identify rural conflicts due to *agricultural production*.

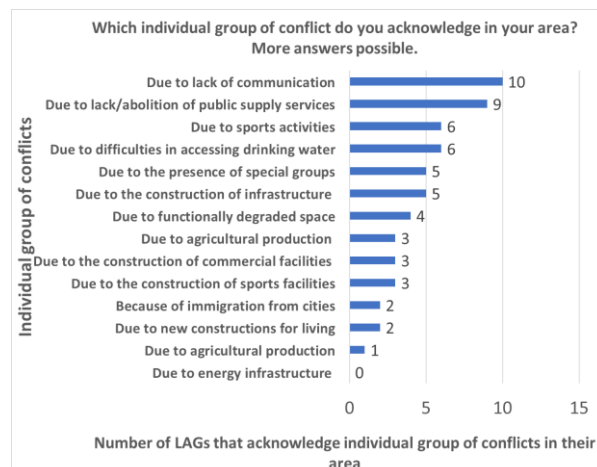


Figure 5: Perception of LAGs on the presence of individual groups of conflicts in rural areas (n=18)

All LAGs in the survey expressed the need for assistance in identifying and resolving conflicts, the most (50%) identified *the need for assistance from lawmakers* and *the need for financial assistance*. 39% of LAGs want *help from decision makers*.

With further in-depth interviews we identified that LAGs perceive themselves as a key mediator of rural conflicts, because of their capability to seek synergies between conflicting interests and expectations. This consists with their main purpose - to use local endogenous rural potential for authentic local rural development (Volk and Bojnec, 2014).

LAG's representatives observe that the assemblies of LAG members are usually a catalyst for conflicts, as all members have an equal opportunity to communicate directly with each other. Therefore, most of conflicts are also successfully resolved there. In rural areas in Slovenia, it is expected that with increasing changes and an increasing number of diverse actors, there will be more and more interactions in the future, as also the need to coordinate diverse interests and resolve conflicts grows (Guštin and Potočnik Slavič, 2015). Therefore, an open direct communication on LAG's assemblies with different stakeholders equally represented could become vital for successful local rural management. According to the in-depth interviews, LAGs want to devote more time and resources to direct contact with the local environment, as this contributes to earlier involvement in resolving pre-conflict situations. Also, they observe, that the level of interaction (verbal and in writing) between LAG stakeholders declines greatly when the tenders are closed. However, according to their opinion, this is the ideal time to talk with stakeholders about their expectations for the next

LDS. LAGs wish they would receive a financial assistance, primarily intended for more field visits during a period when there is a stagnation of resources and communication between members is reduced.

Results of the e-survey and the in-depth interviews suggest that a LAG has a good insight into the spatial, demographic, and economic development of its region over time.

More, based on the results of the e-survey and interviews, LAGs could have a real opportunity to identify conflicts in rural areas and predict with a program of measures how they could be resolved. Results suggest that their role in this topic is more as a mediator and not so much as an actor. However, not all LAGs are aware of this possibility, so decision-makers could draw their attention to this aspect when preparing LDS.

CONCLUSION

Results suggest that most of LAGs are aware of their capability to perceive rural conflicts and also see themselves as a key mediators for solving these conflicts. They are aware of their specific networking status that enables them to build a space where an open direct communication with fair involvement of the private, public, and non-governmental sector is build. For collaboration to be possible at all, a certain degree of trust is needed between actors (Gubbins and MacCurtain, 2008), which the LAGs seem to produce. For the Slovene rural environment this means that LAGs could have the role of a mediator recognized by the state in inter-municipal conflicts.

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