

Finnish Local Action Group work

– experiences from the field

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In this review, I provide an overview of the history of Finnish Local Action Groups (LAGs). I am speaking as a voice from the field, as I have had the opportunity to follow this work from the very beginning, when Finland joined the EU in 1995. I have worked as a managing director, project advisor and consultant both in LAGs and for the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry.

Finnish LEADER method has been praised as the jewel in the crown of Finnish rural policy, but is currently facing many challenges. Principal among these is suffocating bureaucracy and national separation of policy-making and implementation. However, LAGs remain strong, and have recently started a process to develop the LEADER method further.

Enthusiasm

LEADER local rural development began in Finland in 1996 when 22 LEADER II groups were selected by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. These groups did not represent many of the rural areas and the LEADER method was consequently broadened through increased national funding in 1997. In total, LAG work covered nearly a third of rural areas within a year. The speed at which this development took place was phenomenal both looking back and comparing with the current operational environment.

Nationally funded LAGs were termed POMO (Programme of Rural Development based on Local Initiatives) groups. The POMO programme has become legendary among the LAGs in Finland. It was administered directly by the Ministry, the working method was very similar to the Global

Grant method, the LAGs were highly autonomous and bureaucracy was kept to a minimum.

The first LEADER period was characterised by great enthusiasm, the rise of a genuine bottom-up movement and the freedom to develop in both LEADER and POMO groups. LAGs brought something totally different and unforeseen to rural areas. The working method made it possible to bring new, sometimes small, ideas into action and included new contexts, partners and networks. Although the activities themselves were seldom innovative, creation of partnerships and networks was highly innovative.

LAGs encouraged formation of a direct link between local actors and authorities. The importance of such seamless connections cannot be over-emphasised. Through LAGs, local actors were able to influence and improve local circumstances directly, and not just wait for someone else to intervene on their behalf. The LAG method strengthened and continues to strengthen civil society, and its success rests on three pillars: a development programme designed by local people – not by an organisation, funds to implement the programme and an independent and equitable body to make decisions that cannot be reversed by single interest groups. This is the essence of the LAG method and empowerment of local development.

Mainstreaming

During the following programme period (2000-2006) the LAG method was mainstreamed in all rural areas in Finland. There were 58 LAGs in total, funded from different sources (Uusitalo 2009).

The networks expanded and the numbers of local people involved became significant. There were LAG staff, board members, association members, project coordinators etc. Simultaneously, the changing experiences became part of everyday life in the LAGs, strengthening the networks and encouraging increased activity.

One of the characteristic features of this programme period was probably the capacity-building process. The LEADER groups became highly specialised, some becoming strong local developers who were able to make the most of EU and national funding. Some LAGs took over activities including project payments, which were usually taken care of by local authorities. Some groups became LEADERs in international co-operation and carried out several transnational projects.

As the LAG expertise increased they became better able to take broader responsibility for activities. This meant that some LAGs became interested in managing the tasks of authorities, and became even more independent than previously. There were groups that wanted to have a comprehensive Global Grant system for all Finnish LAGs, while others preferred to remain mainly implementers.

As the expertise and the number of people involved increased, the LAG spectrum of activities became more diversified. Local development strengthened, but the common voice got weaker, and it was more challenging to establish common goals and define common problems.

During this programme period, the support from the Ministry was very important. LAGs became the key actors in Finland's rural development work. Rural Policy Committee work supported local development in many ways, mostly through the thematic groups (e.g. welfare services, food, living), that are working under the Rural Policy Committee in the regions.

Bureaucracy

The LEADER method has been a success in Finnish rural development, and the method is well suited to areas with low population density and long distances between towns and villages. It brings the development tools closer to people in

a very cost-efficient way. The main idea is to support activities rather than administration. Finnish LAGs have always had a very small administrative budget so implementation of development programmes has always been the priority.

According to participants, the Finnish LEADER programme has increased public participation, improved capacity building in rural areas, encouraged an innovative approach and even changed national policies (Rinne 2008). During the first two programme periods, LAG know-how has accumulated and reached an impressively high level. The LAGs have survived the growing bureaucracy even though resource allocation has not increased. It is surprising how capable the LAGs have been in problem solving on a very practical level.

At the beginning of the present programme period the implementation of a national programme was separate from the policy-making component. A new bureau was established for the implementation of support payments, the Agency for Rural Affairs. The direct link between the LAGs and the Ministry has therefore weakened and nowadays it includes only matters concerning broader guidelines and policy-making at national and EU level etc. The separation of policy-making and implementation at the national level leads to numerous practical difficulties. The suffocating bureaucracy has increased during the current period, which means that project participants face greater uncertainty over payments, increasing amounts of paper and administration and extended working hours. One can ask now, even though the present programme period has only just begun, is this system any longer sufficiently attractive to local developers?

The LAGs in Finland were very active during the initial processes of the new programme period, trying to influence the national authorities and to make implementation more efficient. The results are yet not very promising but the process will continue. It is unfortunate that so much common effort is now being directed to the battle against increasing bureaucracy, instead to local development planning and related activities.

Visions

The LEADER method has been successful. The implementation varies among countries, and currently it is far too bureaucratic in Finland. The LAGs still believe in the LEADER method and the possibilities for its promotion in rural areas in the future.

With this in mind, the LAGs have started to develop a process in cooperation with the University of Helsinki, Ruralia Institute, Mikkeli). The aim is to improve the method and to launch version 2.0 of the LEADER method in the near future. The process has resulted in development of the Ning-platform, which is an online internet-based social network service.

Lately the discussions in LEADER networks have indicated that we should probably jump back in time and evaluate the good practices we once had at the beginning of the LEADER process in Finland, particularly the POMO programme. The best means of implementation have to be identified and presented at the planning process for the next programme period, which is about to begin.

The links between participants and authorities in LEADER actors is very delicate. At present it is not yet in balance in Finland. The administrative set-up makes local activities and decision-making processes very difficult, and sometimes even impossible. We need new perspectives and the courage to prioritise the results expected from rural development instead of developing administratively faultless practices. These two elements should be mutually supportive and provide the driving force for increased prosperity and a better life for all the involved citizens.

REFERENCES

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