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**The implementation of the Leader  
programme in Central Europe:  
between a local development approach  
and political instrumentalisation**

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# 1 Introduction

Over the course of the last thirty years, the rural development paradigm in the European Union, albeit at different rates and according to different processes in individual countries, evolved significantly. A paradigm of agricultural development based on intensification and modernisation reflecting the tenets of a productivist model has gradually been replaced by a new paradigm in which rural development is integrated, sustainable and, above all, local (Cork Declaration, 1996). Having emerged in the 1970s and been institutionalised in the 1990s by means of the Leader European Initiative Programme,<sup>1</sup> a new model of local development founded on a bottom-up approach to the valorisation of local resources and the involvement of new actors in the elaboration and implementation of strategies began to emerge. This policy initiative, based on a territorial, rather than a sector-based approach, implies a new way of thinking about territorial development – originally founded on a centralised, exogenous model – which takes into account a more endogenous perspective involving new forms of governance. It also implies a new way of thinking about power by encouraging partnerships between local authorities armed with additional rights and responsibilities, and new actors from local associative and entrepreneurial spheres.

In Central Europe, in countries still marked by the influence of centralised political traditions and a sometimes partial, incomplete re-establishment of the autonomy of local authorities (communes, micro-regions, regions, etc.), this transition, perhaps here more than elsewhere, implies a reappraisal of local powers, partnerships and territories providing a platform for new local development projects. Emanating from a combination of EU and domestic policies and, above all, bottom-up initiatives launched by local political actors and new social subjects (*Vanier*, 2002) participating in local development projects (project leaders, enterprises, structured groups, associations, etc.), new structures have emerged in Central Europe, some of them characterised by new forms of governance. These “Local Action Groups” at the origin of a local development model transferred from the EU to new member states emerging from socialism, often test the capacity not only of local actors to strike up partnerships but also of national actors to accompany, initiate and encourage such partnerships and provide an administrative structure to geographical territories.

Theoretically, the construction of these new project territories is designed to reflect the EU’s philosophy on local development, which is *increasingly less precisely defined in the sense that development strategies must be implemented subtly and endogenously rather than within a strictly centralised framework* (*Quéva*, 2006). But how does this process happen in countries which have only

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<sup>1</sup> Liaisons Entre Actions de Développement de l’Economie rurale

very recently returned to local autonomy and in which centralised political traditions are still strong? Have local development policies been able to break free of traditional government frameworks in rural areas?

In countries which are still strongly marked by the traces of a once dominant state centralism (both in terms of institutional frameworks and political representation) and in which the first dominates the second, the implementation of rural development policies, based on bottom-up initiatives, is radically changing the rapport between collective action and the territories in which it is carried out. Using the results of an analysis of the implementation of the Leader Programme in Lithuania, the Czech Republic and Hungary, we will look at how the European local development model is received and applied in Central Europe. Can we really talk about a bottom-up approach in line with the philosophy of local development? To what degree are these territories capable of elaborating and initiating development projects? Is it simply a question of national governments imposing upon local territories and instrumentalising local development?

In the first part of the article, we will re-examine the Leader+ programme which, in Lithuania, the Czech Republic and Hungary, was the first experiment in local development<sup>2</sup> based on the European model. Defined as a learning phase<sup>3</sup> (*Maurel–Halamska*, 2010) both for the institutions of these countries, for which the procedures and methods inherent in the approach were new, and for local communities, the Leader+ programme confronted the actors of rural development (governments, local authorities, entrepreneurs, associations etc.) with the local development model, immediately revealing a certain number of characteristics and problems specific to Central Europe. In the second part of the article, we will focus on current European development policy (2007–2013), notably on specific approaches to the implementation of the new Leader method in the three countries in question. How do the Czech Republic, Hungary and Lithuania interpret the method? What implementation approaches do they propose? In the last part of the article, we will discuss implementation with regards to the founding principles of local development. Can we really talk about a bottom-up approach? Can the local development model really be adjusted to encourage local communities benefitting from the approach to contribute to it? Do methods for transferring the model implemented in these Central European countries conform to the original principles of the Leader programme?

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<sup>2</sup> There were other local development initiatives before the Leader programme, notably in the Czech Republic in the mid-1990s (the village renewal policy) and in Hungary around the turn of the Millennium.

<sup>3</sup> The objective of the Leader+ programme, implemented for a period of two years after the accession of the Central European countries to the EU in 2004, was to prepare the new member states for the EU's 2007–2013 rural development policy.

## 2 Local development between institutional and social learning: the Leader+ model

As new member states joined the European Union, the local development model, which had already been applied with varying degrees of success in Western Europe (*Osti*, 2000), was deployed in the east of the continent. In these post-socialist countries, the application of new local development projects of a kind never seen before was presented at the time as *an act of importing political models* (*Maurel*, 2008, p. 37), or, in other words, an act of transfer of practices, modes of governance, instruments and discourses (*Badies*, 1995) developed in and experienced by other countries with different histories and socio-economic backgrounds. Indeed, *von Hirschhausen–Lacquement* (2007) write of models from the West being applied to the countries of the East.

Generally speaking, in terms of public policy, *Bulmer–Dolowitz–Humphreys – Padgett* (2007) distinguish two main methods of transfer. The first, in the tradition of the Community *acquis*, concerns the strict transfer of legal provisions and regulations from the institutions of the European Union to new member states according to a hierarchical and constrictive type of governance. This transfer requires, amongst other things, a substantial amount of institutional learning on the part of new member states which, in the mid-1990s, began, with a view to joining the EU, the process of ensuring that their institutions and modes of governance conformed to various European Directives (decentralisation, regionalisation, reimplementation of local autonomy, etc.).

The second, more flexible, method of transfer seeks to encourage social learning by placing a greater emphasis on the transposition and adoption by national authorities of the local principles, methods and expertise deriving from the European Union than on the normative regulatory framework. Clearly, this kind of transfer appears to be in line with a philosophy of local development based on the capacity of local actors to display the type of initiative required to boost the dynamic. It was this mode of transfer that was selected by the EU with a view to implementing the Leader programme in Europe. Thus, European institutions defined an ensemble of principles and local and endogenous development methods intended to guide rural development policies within each individual country.

## 2.1 The Leader+ program: a theoretically suitable politico-administrative framework

Funded by the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund for the period 2004–2006, the Leader+ programme introduced rural development techniques to the Czech Republic, Hungary and Lithuania in preparation for the adoption of EU rural development policy for 2007–2013. The Leader+ programme is part of an initiative designed to decentralise public policy and introduce a more localised definition of public problems and of approaches used to deal with them. The programme encourages actors, be they institutional (at various levels), economic or from Non-Governmental Organisations, to work together.

Recourse to the Leader method presupposes the existence of institutions capable of providing support for such an approach. In the wake of the decentralisation processes implemented in the three countries in the early 1990s and of the *europeanisation* of public action which accompanied their accession to the European Union, changes in regional political and management structures were favourable to the implementation of the Leader programme. The various decentralisation policies applied in the early 1990s, combined with institutional changes at various infra-state levels from the region to the commune and the introduction of local democracy, which is currently being consolidated, provides a legal and administrative framework which conforms with the programme's implementation requirements.

In the Czech Republic, local autonomy was introduced at the communal level in 1990. Administrative regions equipped with representative organs and competences in terms of regional development were set up ten years later. The situation in Hungary and Lithuania is similar, even if these states have only granted relatively weak powers to their regional authorities. Generally speaking, these decentralisation processes went hand-in-hand with a reinforcement of the role of local and regional institutional actors (territorial and local collectivities) which, backed by national governments, developed new forms of cooperation (intercommunality) with them<sup>4</sup> as well as with new NGOs, associations, entrepreneurs, etc. (*Maurel-Lacquement, 2007*) as part of preparations to join the EU – the Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development and PHARE (Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies) – and the initial rural development policies.

An example is provided by the village renewal programme introduced in the Czech Republic in 1991. The programme supports the formation of micro-regions (free unions of communes working on joint-projects) and the rural development

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<sup>4</sup> This is above all true of the Czech Republic (and, to a lesser degree, of Hungary) which, due to a high degree of territorial fragmentation, have introduced new forms of cooperation at the micro-regional level with a view, amongst other things, to sharing responsibility for the management of local public services.



strategies for which they are responsible. Later, towards 2001, the same micro-regions would provide the basis for the launch of the Leader+ programme, which became operational in 2004. Hungary's first experiences in the field came in the form of the PHARE and SAPARD programmes designed to prepare the country for integration into the EU. In Hungary, an experimental programme based on the Leader model was implemented in 2001. The programme's objective was to prepare territorial diagnostics, to elaborate local development strategies and their attendant implementation procedures, and to launch pilot operations. With a budget of €1.7 million, the mission of the fourteen Local Action Groups set up during this period (theoretically in a spontaneous manner, but in reality heavily supported by the regions in whose electoral constituencies they were located) was to adapt the local development plan to three major tasks, namely, the integration of Roma populations into local communities, training young people, and providing support to families. Lastly, in Lithuania, the first local development programme based on the Leader model was also run within the framework of the SAPARD programme as well as in that of the rural partnership programme led by British consultants and the Baltic-America local authorities partnership programme.

## **2.2 The first Leader+ experiences in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Lithuania**

In the Czech Republic, ten Local Action Groups supported by the micro-regions were selected from amongst the thirty candidacies lodged in late 2004, and funds have been allocated to implementing the strategy over a period of three years. The themes of the strategies presented by the Local Action Groups focused on improving the quality of life in rural areas, supporting the economic environment, promoting local production, and natural and cultural resources. Those eligible to run projects included production and processing firms in the agriculture and forestry sectors, associations, communes and inter-communal organisations. In the Czech Republic, the Ministry of Agriculture was also responsible for the Leader CZ (or Czech Leader) project. This programme consisted of an ensemble of measures identical to the preceding ones which functioned according to the principles underlying the Leader method but with a more modest budget than Leader+. The Ministry retained a small number of projects every year, depending on the budget allocated. For example, in 2006, sixty-four bids were lodged, and twenty-three selected with an overall budget of 70 million koruna. These Local Action Groups made it possible to fund 283 projects (131 presented by agricultural enterprises, 121 by municipalities, and 31 by associations). In total, or, in other words, for both programmes, eighty-five Local Action Groups were

selected in the Czech Republic. The Groups varied in size, with some containing around 10,000 inhabitants, most containing between 10,000 and 25,000 inhabitants, and a few being much larger (three contained around 90,000 inhabitants). In terms of the involvement of local actors, there is a substantial amount of variation between different regions. With the highest number of Local Action Groups, Southern Bohemia is very active. This is also true of the regions of Olomouc, Plzeň and Liberec. In Central Bohemia, there is a difference between Greater Prague, where the outlying districts of the conglomeration exert a strong influence over the micro-regions and the rest of the region. The regions of Pardubice, Vysočina and Brno are not relatively inactive.<sup>5</sup>

In 2004, after the three countries joined the EU, the Leader+ programme was applied. The programme, included in the “Operational Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development, 2004–2006” had a budget of 19 million euros, two-thirds of which was provided by the European Union. After a monitoring committee was set up in July 2004, the programme was officially launched in 2005. As elsewhere in Europe, the selection of Local Action Groups was based on a calls for tender process (two were launched in Hungary in 2005 and 2006). Sixty-seven Local Action Groups were chosen, 17 more than the 50 originally envisaged. Strategies began to be implemented in early 2006 and, in the same year, a national support network was set up in all the country’s regions in the form of agencies linked to the Secretariat for Sustainable Development.

Lastly, in Lithuania, the first experience in developing the Leader model also took place within the framework of the Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development (SAPARD) as well as of the rural partnership programme organised by British consultants, and the local authorities partnership programme developed under the aegis of the Baltic-America partnership. From 2004, the EU initiative Leader+, with a budget of €2,440,094, became the main instrument for rural development. In Lithuania, the programme, which, as elsewhere in Europe, was to some degree experimental in nature, focused on funding learning processes. In 2006, ten Local Action Groups were selected from amongst twenty-seven bids. Six projects concentrated on improving the quality of life, three on the use of natural and cultural resources, and one on setting up small firms. Each project received half-a-million litas (almost €150,000), up to 15% of which could be allocated to administrative costs.

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<sup>5</sup> Data provided by the Ministry of Agricultural. Interview conducted on June 21, 2006.

### 2.3 Administrative, political and social problems of the first period

If, by 2004, the political, economic and social transformations carried out by the three countries created conditions favourable to the implementation of the Leader programme, other factors were to undermine, or at least negatively affect, to varying degrees, the very principles of local development.

#### *Administrative problems*

The biggest problem concerns the heritage of the collectivist system which continues to characterise the three countries' rural areas and administrative institutions. The centralised, bureaucratic tenor of the programme constitutes an initial factor. The Leader+ programme was directly administered by the countries' Ministries of Agriculture, which were more interested at the time in agricultural modernisation than in rural development in the broad sense of the term. With a sometimes very narrow vision of the programme (and, indeed, also of rural development), they focused above all on funding agricultural projects, as in the Czech Republic, where, for example, nearly three-quarters of the budget allocated to the Leader+ initiative was affected to modernising farms (renovating buildings, purchasing materials, etc.). On the pretext that it was funded by the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund, the Ministries of Agriculture of the three countries more or less strictly defined a series of rules, sometimes setting up an extremely precise framework for the management and organisation of a programme meant, at least according to national politicians, to be endogenous and decentralised. In Hungary, for example, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development defined the rules governing bids for Local Action Groups, imposing an extremely rigid normative framework. It provided strict guidance for local development strategies based on its own regional development policies, selected projects, and allocated funds by defining evaluation criteria based not only on the relevance of projects to local needs but also on Local Action Groups' ability to manage public funds.

#### *Political problems*

Another factor undermining the local development approach derives from the continued existence of often highly influential networks of interests, frequently of a political and economic nature, for which the Leader+ programme provides a new legitimacy at the local level. On the basis of more or less affirmed clientelistic practices (*Meyer-Sahling, 2007*), local politicians, particularly mayors, well-established in their communes and often involved in local entrepreneurial networks, began to play a central role in the approach, often in partnership with other local actors. Many of these local politicians were active at the national level. They therefore occupied a strategic position enabling them, in a context in which

communication on the part of central administrations and the bureaucracy responsible for managing the programme was poor or non-existent, to exploit, on a more or less informal basis, their politico-administrative networks, which were sometimes particularly well-established, and to acquire the kind of information required to develop their projects. They are also able to use those networks to obtain additional funding. Often the only people capable of dealing with the bureaucratic elements of the Leader programme imposed by the central administration, they were generally highly motivated in terms of seizing an opportunity to set up a Local Action Group. Later, they would be the first to sign up to the new 2007–2013 Leader programme. Now veritable entrepreneurs of local development, they are, without a shadow of a doubt, the people who have gained most from the programme.

### *Social problems*

Lastly, the socio-economic context encompassing the local development programme should be taken into consideration. The economic crisis increases the risk of the most isolated rural areas becoming marginalised. And while, theoretically, the Leader programme offers local actors the possibility of mobilising their capacity for action and exploiting new resources, in reality, it is highly dependent on the degree and methods of involvement of local communities and their capacity to appropriate the philosophy of the local development model. Generally speaking, civil society in the three countries is relatively weak (*Maurel – Halamska, 2010*), and there are few associations and unions. Even if civil society is kept informed throughout the implementation process, notably by means of discussion forums, it must be admitted that it takes very little part in collective action and seems not to take much interest in the local governance system. For example, in the *Ekorégion Ulhava* Local Action Group in Southern Bohemia – and a similar situation pertains in all the Local Action Groups in the three countries – discussion forums, launched and managed by politicians, attract only a handful of people, most of whom are entrepreneurs interested in the possibility of funding their own projects rather than in elaborating any kind of rural development strategy. With only a few exceptions, ordinary citizens are absent from the discussion process. This is especially true of young people and the unemployed. Even if the situation varies from region to region, it can generally be stated that, due to a lack of initiative or a simple absence of knowledge about procedures, civil society takes little interest in the kind of collective action encouraged by the Leader+ programme.

### **3 The new programme: 2007–2013**

Strengthening rural development policy has become a European Union priority. Indeed, this point was clarified by the European Council of Gothenburg in 2001, which focused less on market mechanisms and more on improving, by means of targeted subsidies, the quality of the environment and conserving nature and the countryside. In the wake of the fundamental reform of the first pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in 2003 and 2004, the “Agriculture” Council adopted, in September 2005, a radical reform of the rural development policy for 2007–2013 based on a proposal issued by the Commission in July 2004 (Regulation (CE) No. 1698/2005).

#### **3.1 Methods for transferring the Leader programme...**

The EU rural development policy for 2007–2013, now a part of the second pillar of the CAP, continues, like its predecessor, to deliver a series of measures within which member states can choose to embark upon policies for which they receive financial support from the EU within the framework of integrated rural development programmes. In this regard, it was decided that the Leader programme should no longer be funded through structural funds but through the new European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.<sup>6</sup> This policy reinforces the strategic content of programmes and places a greater emphasis on the sustainable development of rural areas. Reflecting the conclusions of the Salzburg Conference and the orientations of the Councils of Lisbon and Gothenburg, three main objectives were defined for the 2007–2013 period, namely to boost agricultural competitiveness; to improve the environment and rural areas by providing support to land management; and to improve the quality of life in rural areas and promote the diversification of economic activities.

These three axes are implemented in each of the three countries within the framework of specific rural development policies. They are accompanied by a methodological axis dedicated to the Leader approach and designed to help actors in the rural sphere improve the long-term potential of their local areas.

Insofar as the content of the first three axes is concerned, each member state must choose from a list of strategic orientations provided by the EU a series of priorities which, according to the Union, generate the most added value. Member states must then integrate those priorities into their programmes. In terms of their national strategies, each country must also make the best possible use of synergies both within and between axes and to avoid any potential contradictions. They can

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<sup>6</sup> At least 5% of the funds allocated to regional development in the former member states and 2.5% in the new member states.

also – and this is true of the Czech Republic – take into account other EU strategies, particularly in the field of the environment. This approach enables the EU to focus its rural development co-funding efforts on EU priorities with three policy axes, while at the same time leaving enough room for member states and their regions to strike a balance between the sector-based dimension (agricultural reconstruction) and the territorial dimension (land management and the socio-economic development of rural areas).

As above, the fourth axis – the Leader axis – is designed to fund the implementation of local strategies for developing Local Action Groups, based on one or more themes of the first three axes of European rural development policy – joint transnational and inter-territorial projects involving the Local Action Groups – and the operating costs of the Local Action Groups. The aim is to ensure that they are better able to prepare local development strategies. The integration of the Leader initiative into general rural development programmes is an important stage in the simplification process in that it provides a unique funding framework for rural development.

There remains the question of how public policies should be articulated. Each country must ensure that policies funded in a given territory and sector by the European Regional Development Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Social Fund, the European Fisheries Fund, and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development should complement one another in a coherent manner. All these principles are inscribed within the national strategic reference framework of each member state and in the national strategic plan for rural development.

In the Czech Republic, the Rural Development Programme (RDP) is divided into four axes whose contents are similar to those suggested by the EU. In the Czech Republic, the Leader programme corresponds to Axis 4 of the 2007–2013 rural development programme. The purpose of the Leader axis is to improve quality of life in rural areas, to boost economic potential by exploiting natural and cultural rural heritage, and to maximise managerial and administrative capacity in rural areas. As elsewhere, the objective is to implement local development and cooperation strategies and encourage the development of local partnerships. With this aim in mind, budgets managed by the Ministry of Agriculture's Payment Agency (SZIF) are distributed between Local Action Group training programmes (18%), the implementation of local development strategies (72%), and joint projects with other Local Action Groups (10%).

In Lithuania, the implementation of the Leader approach is articulated around four measures outlined in the Third Axis of the National Programme for Rural Development. These measures concern:

- The transition to a non-agricultural economy. This measure is designed to diversify economic activity by supporting micro-enterprises and helping

farmers diversify into services and artisanship. These new activities are designed to generate additional revenue.

- The provision of subsidies for setting up and developing enterprises, specifically micro-enterprises; this measure focuses on rural populations who want to diversify their activities or extend their markets.
- Developing rural tourism. This measure targets the development of artisanship and setting up and developing outdoor R&R areas.

The renovation of villages. This measure concerns the renovation of buildings, the conservation of heritage sites and aspects of the landscape, and the development of infrastructure (including the drainage, adduction and evacuation of water).

Lastly, in Hungary, the National Rural Development Programme is part of the New Hungary Rural Development Programme.<sup>7</sup> The programme is articulated around four axes similar to those suggested by other Central European member states, with the particularity that the third thematic axis functions according to the Leader procedure. This axis, which is linked to quality of life and the diversification of the rural economy, is structured around four measures. Two focus on enterprises, providing investment and aid for diversification, and support for the development of tourism, while the other two focus on local associations and collectivities (renovating villages and conserving cultural heritage).<sup>8</sup> This essentially concerns buildings protected by the local authority or the State.

The objective of the fourth Leader axis is to provide aid in the development of innovative projects and to monitor their progress. The fourth axis has many points in common with the third. This similarity, coupled with the interdiction against co-funding projects, means that a distinction must be made between approaches taken at the micro-regional and national levels.

### **3.2 ...And specific approaches to its implementation in Central Europe**

The Leader approach is designed to help actors in the rural world boost the long-term potential of their local areas. It aims to encourage the implementation of original, high-quality integrated strategies targeting sustained local development. These strategies must be defined and implemented by broad local partnerships, identical to those existing in the previous procedures, namely, Local Action Groups. As with previous programmes, the process of setting up Local Action Groups, while framed by EU directives, notably in terms of the demographic

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<sup>7</sup> In Hungary, there are two major development programmes: the New Hungary Programme financed by structural funds, and the New Hungary Rural Development Programme. Only 10% of the total development budget is allocated to the second programme, or, in other words, to rural issues.

<sup>8</sup> The measure concerns buildings protected either by the local authority or the State.

characteristics of the territories thus defined and of the identification of actors establishing partnerships (institutional, economic and associative actors), is intimately linked to local and national contexts.

As well as the issue of the composition of Local Action Groups, there is the question of the kind of status and recognition accorded to them by individual member states. On this point, as with the preceding programme, the EU imposes no regulatory constraints. Each country is free to implement its own approaches to setting up or selecting Local Action Groups, be it within the framework of a veritable bottom-up approach (by leaving local territories the freedom to develop their own projects), or, on the contrary, by imposing a more restrictive normative framework.

In the Czech Republic, the population of Local Action Groups must be between 10,000 and 100,000 inhabitants, excluding towns of over 25,000 inhabitants (and, of course, the capital, Prague) and provide a critical quantity of human, financial and economic resources with a view to supporting a sustainable development strategy. The Local Action Group must be inscribed within the framework of the micro-regions (which are themselves project territories already defined by national rural development policy) without, however, it being necessary for their parameters to coincide with those of the administrative boundaries of NUTS3 regions. While such parameters correspond to those of project territories, whether or not particular communes are included in these structures depends on the objectives that have been set: critical mass in terms of the number of inhabitants, and the political solidarity of local mayors. The parameter must include the land registers of all municipalities taking part in the project territory. This territory must be continuous and should have shared characteristics and problems.

In Lithuania, Local Action Groups must have between 5,000 and 150,000 inhabitants, including towns of under 6,000 inhabitants. In the initial phase, most Local Action Group territories either corresponded to the savivaldybė, (a small region), or included a number of adjoining savivaldybė or an entire administrative region. The Local Action Groups, which covered vast expanses, experienced difficulties in terms of internal communication, management, and, above all, co-funding on the part of the many savivaldybė that they encompassed. After the 2004–2006 programme, those Local Action Groups were dismantled. They now obligatorily correspond to a single savivaldybė whatever the project proposed and its coherence with the territory.

In Hungary, where the procedure for setting up Local Action Groups is much more precisely defined by national government bodies than elsewhere in Europe, the Minister of Agriculture responsible for the New Hungary Rural Development Programme has encouraged the setting up of large local communities (HK), structures supporting the Local Action Programmes, by suggesting that the



authority favours large Local Action Groups over small project territories. Thus, generally speaking, under pressure from the Ministry, Local Action Groups are made up of two statistical micro-regions, approximately corresponding to the country's electoral constituencies.

### *Selection criteria for Local Action Groups*

Except in Lithuania, where any region or territory which so desires can, theoretically (on condition that it respects size and partnership criteria) become a Local Action Group and propose a strategic development project to the government, Local Action Groups are selected by means of competitions between bidders following calls for tender organised by the Ministry of Agriculture. In the Czech Republic, the Project Selection Commission operates within the framework of a commission constituted by the Ministry of Agriculture and includes representatives of NGOs, research institutes (the Institute of Agricultural Economics, VUZE) and experts designated by the regions (chosen from outside the Local Action Group sphere). The Ministry has held seminars for experts with a view to explaining selection and assessment criteria. Amongst the most important of these criteria are the potential of the territory for which the project has been suggested (in terms of traditions, relations, history, business). Preferential criteria are defined in the official document, *Pravidla* (October 2008), and are familiar to Local Action Group candidates.

In Hungary, the situation is more complex. In 2007, the Ministry of Agriculture introduced a new management structure for the local development programme, the Local Development Offices (HVI). These Offices, set up in all statistical micro-regions (administrative scale), have no analogues in the other Central European countries. Funded by the Ministry of Agriculture (from a budget allocated by the New Hungary Rural Development Programme), competitions are organised in the micro-regions to decide who will manage them. Local authority associations, and associations with multiple objectives, such as enterprises, are able to bid. With the technical aid of managers, the tasks of these Offices include organising bids for the third and fourth axes of the national rural development programme, and, above all, setting up local communities (HK) whose parameters correspond to the administrative region (or to a number of administrative regions) and whose objective is, after being recognised by the Ministry, to become Local Action Groups. Local communities set up by the HK must be registered by the Ministry of Agriculture. After having been recognised, they acquire a Coordination and Planning Group (TKCS), elected from amongst the members of the Local Action Group and representing the civil, public and private sectors. These Groups are composed of no less than five members, including at least one academic, all of whom have solid management experience. They are responsible for planning and elaborating the local development strategy

which is subject to selection by the Ministry. After being validated, HKs legally become Local Action Groups.

### *Elaborating the local development strategy*

At the local level, the rural development programme is described in a strategic orientation document which defines, for the 2007–2013 period, the major axes of local development for each project territory. Local development strategy objectives, evaluated by each Local Action Group and characterised by a variety of approaches, focus, in conformity with European directives, on territorial equipment projects, local economy diversification strategies and cultural and identity-based initiatives designed to improve the image and attractiveness of various local areas. In theory, these strategic orientation documents are designed by project initiators, more or less efficiently supported by rural development managers. However, they can also be elaborated by consultancy firms or private development agencies. This situation, already largely developed in the preceding programme (notably in the Czech Republic) is based on veritable “turnkey” approaches resulting in projects which are often lacking in originality and identical from one territory to the next.

The EU does not impose any particular methodology for elaborating strategies, but contents itself instead with stipulating that they should emanate from local territories and must have given rise to discussion in the form of conferences and forums. In this regard, the Ministries responsible for implementing rural development policy are obliged to organise, within their countries, a *National Rural Network*. This platform is designed to serve as a point of contact with the “base” and facilitate contacts between institutions, associations and enterprises, the objective of which would be to better integrate NGOs into the processes of elaborating strategies and improving the circulation of expertise in terms of operating the programme.

Each country is free to choose whether or not to impose a formal framework on the process of elaborating its strategic documents. In Hungary, for example, local development strategies are governed by Regulation No. 93/2007 of the New Hungary Rural Development Programme. The coordination and planning bodies of each Local Action Group sketch out a strategic plan and present it to the Ministry’s management authority. The programme is run with the aid of software and the management authority applies extremely strict deadlines and operating rules. All these rules, which are highly constraining for local actors, make it much easier for the Management Authority to evaluate proposed strategies.

Moreover, there are no real national or regional methodologies for developing strategies (other than “turnkey” strategies offered and sold by various private companies). What is available is aid and advice from the authorities. For example, in the Czech Republic, training was provided by the Ministry of Agriculture and

the *Narodni Observator Venkova* to help managers and local actors elaborate their strategies and projects. Around a hundred Local Action Groups took part. Managers are also helped and provided with information by regional information centres (*krajska informacnii strediska*) which, in the regions, depend on the Ministry of Agriculture and take part in forums (National Rural Network, Nation LAG Network, etc.).

### *The implementation of strategies*

Generally speaking, the objective of the Leader programme is to fund innovative projects selected through competitions organised at the local level whose contents conform to development strategies proposed by Local Action Groups. Projects can be organised by associations, enterprises, and local authorities. As we have seen, each country defines its own priorities in terms of projects, and identifies, according to the measures and actions it adjudges to be most important, the kind of bodies that could feasibly request and receive funding for their projects (in Lithuania and Hungary, for example, some measures are reserved to local authorities).

In this regard, Local Action Groups have two missions. The first is to communicate about local development strategy by keeping potential project initiators informed and organising calls for tender. The second is to select projects.

Generally speaking, in the Czech Republic, Local Action Groups are entirely responsible for implementing their strategy. They directly select projects which, after having been approved by various management bodies, are funded by national rural development programmes. The selection process involves three calls for tender per year. Projects are examined at the local level by a project committee set up within the Local Action Group (*projekty vybor*). In Lithuania, the methods used to select and administrate projects differ according to who is running them and the measures that have received funding. The selection and management of projects in the first three measures of the Leader axis – setting up micro-enterprises, developing tourism, and developing artisanship – fall under the entire responsibility of the Local Action Groups, while the fourth, concerning the renovation of villages, is directly managed by the Payment Agency after dossiers have been selected by the Local Action Groups.

In Hungary, rural development strategies are implemented and projects selected within the framework of a close partnership between the Local Action Groups and the Minister of Agriculture. Each Local Action Group (which also manages Axis 3 of the national rural development programme) and the Minister of Agriculture decide separately on bids for projects. They both establish lists of priority projects which are then arbitrated, at the national level, by a monitoring committee responsible for making the final decision.

## **4 Implementing the Leader programme: a genuine approach to local development of an example of political instrumentalisation?**

### **4.1 Contrasting outcomes in the implementation of the Leader programme**

The 2007–2013 rural development programme is implemented at different rates in different countries. While some are already selecting projects which will receive funding, others have only just chosen their Local Action Groups. In this regard, the country which has, to date, made the most progress in the process is the Czech Republic.

In the Czech Republic, the first call for tender for the development of a Local Action Group was launched in Autumn 2007. One hundred and two projects were submitted and the selection process took place in spring 2008. Forty-eight Local Action Groups were retained. A second call for tender was organised in October 2008. This time, 92 bids were lodged to a value of 62,369,218 Czk. Initially, in April 2009, only thirty-two were selected, due to a lack of funds.<sup>9</sup> But, later on, the Ministry decided to select an additional thirty-two Local Action Groups by employing a different funding approach to the rural development plan.<sup>10</sup> The thirty-two successful candidates for the second tender signed their contracts with the Payment Agency in June 2009, with the others signing the following month.

At the outset, seventy Local Action Group projects were retained. However, after discussions with NGOs, the Ministry of Agriculture retained 112, eighty of which were directly funded by the Leader programme (48 in 2008 and 32 in 2009), and thirty-two funded by the measure covering land consolidation. The Ministry preferred to increase the number of beneficiaries, while reducing its budget with a view to covering the territory more effectively. In the end, in the Czech Republic, only 28 Local Action Group bids were rejected. The 48 Local Action Groups selected in 2008 received an average of 8–9 million Czech koruna, the 32 selected in 2009 received an average of 10 million, while the 32 additional Local Action Groups selected in 2008 received an average of only 4–5 million koruna. On average, Local Action Groups take a month to elaborate their strategies. Although this may appear to be a short space of time, it should be borne in mind that most Local Action Groups had already begun to prepare their strategies in Spring 2007. According to the Ministry's Department of Aid to the Rural Development Plan, in most cases, the micro-regions were at the origin of

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<sup>9</sup> It was nevertheless understood that rejected projects could also take part in the international cooperation programme.

<sup>10</sup> The Czech Ministry of Agriculture estimates that the measure on land consolidation conforms to Axis 4 of the Leader programme, with representatives from Local Action Groups sitting on monitoring committees.

Local Action Groups and their strategies. Many entrepreneurs in the field were mayors and micro-regional managers.

In Lithuania, on September 1, 2009, 51 Local Action Groups joined the Leader programme. Thirty-five of those Local Action Groups prepared a local development strategy and lodged it with the Payment Agency for assessment. Thirty-three Local Action Groups received a positive evaluation and were thereby guaranteed the funding required to implement their strategies. Currently, only fifteen Local Action Groups have signed contracts with the Payment Agency, while three others have begun to launch calls for tender with a view to selecting local projects.

Lastly, in Hungary, the time-scale for the implementation of the Leader programme was much longer than elsewhere in Europe. Setting up the intermediary structures required needed to organise Local Action Groups (local rural development offices and rural communities, for example) considerably added to the time need to institute the procedure. As elsewhere in Europe, the process began in January 2007, in this instance with the introduction of the New Hungary Rural Development Programme. In March of the same year, the Ministry of Agriculture held competitions for the right to run Local Rural Development Offices, responsible for implementing the Leader programme in the micro-regions. The Development Offices were opened in May. In turn, each Local Development Office set up a Local Community (a structure prefiguring the Local Action Group), registered at the Ministry between September 2007 and March 2008. These structures were given 120 days, between January and May 2008, to outline their local development strategy. Of 123 requests for the recognition of Local Communities, and after lengthy negotiations within each micro-region, 96 were finally lodged and registered at the Ministry (corresponding approximately to two micro-regions). All of them became Local Action Groups on September 26, 2008, the Ministry of Agricultural having been neither willing nor able to make a selection based on the strategies proposed by Local Communities. In November 2008, applying an extremely rigorous procedure, the Ministry of Agriculture launched a call for tenders amongst the Local Action Groups for the management of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Axis of the rural development policy. Bids were made in January 2009, and the results of the process published in September 2009. Lastly, in terms of the 4<sup>th</sup> Leader axis, the Local Action Groups lodged their bids on November 15, 2009. The Ministry published the results of the bidding process in early 2010.

## 4.2 An increasingly powerful process of inclusion/exclusion of local actors

Experiences of running the Leader programme in the three European countries examined in this article have revealed its *paradoxical nature*. Although based on a rhetoric of endogenous development and a bottom-up approach, we are dealing with an imported methodological script (Maurel–Halamska, 2010), whose symbols and terminology are foreign to rural communities (see Dargan–Schuksmith, 2008, for the term “innovation”) and to the implementation structures and objectives characterising local areas.

These paradoxical logics have a number of consequences. Primary amongst them is a dynamic of *inclusion-exclusion* amongst actors in the public sphere. Heavy bureaucracy and complex procedures make it relatively difficult to grasp the workings of the programme in its entirety. Developing a rural development project in such conditions involves mastering a highly technocratic and administrative language requiring a series of skills (in terms of elaborating dossiers, for example) that only professionals and specialists in the field of local development possess. In fact, at the local level, a group of local managers, project managers, and highly qualified individuals, aware of how useful European programmes are in terms of justifying their continued employment, were to become important actors in the implementation of the Leader programme. With their expertise and managerial skills, the members of this new “project class” (Kováč–Kučerová, 2006) have carved out a privileged social position for themselves.

On the other hand, striking up partnerships does not automatically make it possible to involve marginal groups, such as women, which, in the end, helps to reinforce the position of local elites (Shortal, 2004). Secondly, in order to respect guidance norms, local actors are obliged to develop their learning capacities and adaptive skills, which is consonant with the deployment of *informal spaces* in which public policies (Ray, 2000) and *avoidance strategies* (in the sense of Pfeffer–Salancik, 1978) can be reinterpreted. For example, in certain Local Action Groups in the Czech Republic (Plésiat–Marty, 2010), mayors, who are overrepresented, are accorded a different status in order to formally respect a 1/3-1/3-1/3 distribution scheme.

The full-time administrators of Local Action Groups responsible for larger budgets are becoming increasingly professional, a fact which strengthens the position of the already highly qualified “project class.” Lastly, in parallel to the growing influence of Local Action Group members, questions about their legitimacy – notably concerning the risk of clientelism and the unwanted development of competition between different communes – are being asked with increasing frequency. These latent functions and dysfunctions, to use Robert Merton’s terminology, are all the more evident in the New Member States in that the EU spent little time considering how its rural development policies would be received there.

### 4.3 The programme is still largely defined by a pre-existing framework

In all three countries, the government and the central administration are the main actors in terms of the transfer of the rural development policy model. In practice, it is essentially run, as in the preceding phase of the programme, by the countries' respective Ministries of Agriculture and Rural Development – responsible for the financial management of the programme – and a certain number of associative organs (Local Action Group associations, etc.). Even if they each have their own specific characteristics, it is nevertheless possible to establish a number of similarities between these entities.

Firstly, in each instance, the Ministries of Agriculture plays a preponderant role. The Ministries interpret, with varying degrees of accuracy, EU rural development legislation (which they often tend to make unnecessarily complex) and impose a normative management framework on the programme. They continue to focus on agricultural issues rather than on questions of rural development. Moreover, three years after the Leader 2007–2013 programme was implemented, they have yet to show any particular aptitude in terms of managing non-agricultural programmes.

Another characteristic shared by the three countries is the centralised approach taken to managing the programme. In effect, due to their central role (particularly in terms of the formulation of action principles, the definition of procedures and the adoption of eligibility criteria), the national authorities have a great deal of influence over how the programme is managed. Amongst other things, they control the channels through which information is diffused. In this regard, they are often responsible not only for a lack of procedural transparency but also, and more importantly, for the fact that Local Action Group assessment and selection processes are highly bureaucratic and that it takes an inordinate amount of time to procure funding for the strategies proposed by these last. While the national authorities also initiate training programmes for future managers of Local Action Groups, they adjust the content of those programmes in function of their own vision of local development and the national methodology that they hope to implement. They can then count on the support of various levels of the public administration (in the regions and districts) to ensure that these training programmes are organised as they would wish.

The new version of the 2007–2013 Leader programme has also provided national authorities with a decisive role in terms of institutional mediation (*Chevalier–Maurel*, 2010). In Hungary, for example, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development uses the Leader programme to implement its own planning programme. Beyond any principle of freedom granted to local authorities in the “elaboration of their project territory”, it restricts, with varying degrees of success, the parameters of rural communities, on which Local Action

Groups are based, to two micro-regions. Such units of territory, apparently suitable for the implementation of regional development policies,<sup>11</sup> are often entirely incoherent and ineffectual in terms of collective approaches to local development (the geographical area is often too big; there is frequently a lack of socio-economic or cultural coherence, etc.). Thus, unlike the local development approach according to which projects should be targeted at specific geographical areas, the Hungarian government is extending the Leader programme to its entire rural territory.

Generally speaking, there is a very noticeable asymmetry in relations between national and local actors. In the tradition of subordination inherited from the old communist regime, local actors continue to be highly dependent on the goodwill of the central administration and its various regional organs. These last play a role in diffusing information and transferring solutions in the form of public initiatives. They are helped in their task by other actors, known as “facilitators” (Chevalier–Maurel, 2010), who also contribute to diffusing ideas; examples of such “facilitators” include NGOs working in rural areas, and consulting firms, the number of which has increased substantially over the course of the last three years. Veritable entrepreneurs of the transfer process, they contribute to the success of the programme by making it easier for local people to see in a positive light.

## 5 Conclusion

*Can we really talk about an adjustment of the local development model encouraging the involvement of local beneficiary communities?*

The bottom-up approach implies encouraging local actors and people to think about the development process in a new way. The mental heritage of the communist system, the passivity of local people, and the ever-widening gap between national political traditions and the principles of local elective democracy still represent a substantial obstacle to the implementation of local development principles. The unsuitable nature of rural social structures in terms of the presuppositions of the bottom-up approach continues to have an inhibiting effect on the reception of the Leader model. In effect, the lack of social capital, and, more particularly, of entrepreneurs, as well as the weakness of social links, the overall under-education of the rural population and, above all, the process of demographic ageing very often combine to militate against the participation of local

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<sup>11</sup> In Hungary, rural communities, which do much to support Local Action Groups, which, in turn, cover the entirety of the rural territory of the country, also provide the operational framework for the management of projects in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Axis of EU rural development policy.



actors and the emergence of partnerships (even though such approaches are at the basis of local development policy). It is therefore difficult for local communities to adapt and make good use of their skills and exploit their own resources.

That said, most local politicians are convinced that the Leader programme is useful. For them, this “manna” from the European Union can help them build the kind of infrastructure needed in their constituencies. This positive attitude is an example of a new state of mind which doubtless accounts, to a large degree, for the programme’s success. Since civil society is still relatively weak, generally restricted networks made up of a few groups of people gravitating around politicians and project heads all of whom know and mutually support one another are able to impose their view at the level of the local territory. The activism of political elites who play a dominant role clearly contrasts with the passivity of most of the inhabitants of rural areas.

*Do the methods for transferring the model implemented in the three Central European countries conform to the original principles of the Leader programme?*

With the increasing involvement of “facilitator-actors” – particularly project research and consultancy firms – in the process of transferring the local development model (Maurel, 2008) and elaborating strategic orientation documents (theoretically designed by the project initiators), the very principles of the Leader programme are under threat of being commandeered, replaced by a uniform approach to rural development. In effect, in order to respond to admissibility criteria and thus improve their chances of obtaining a Local Action Group, politicians must strictly observe the directives issued by national bodies. They are invited, amongst other things, to appropriate the grammar expressing the rules governing the Leader programme. Due to its bureaucratic nature, those unfamiliar with its principles are often moved to use consultancy firms, project managers and development agencies to prepare their rural development strategy for them. In fact, often partially *a-territorialised*, the strategies elaborated within the framework of remunerated missions and the projects deriving from them reflect a real lack of originality. In such cases, the real objective of the Leader approach – innovation in strategic innovation – can be somewhat neglected. Today, the most widespread way of transferring the rural development model and elaborating strategies seems to consist of copying “turnkey” formats bereft of originality.

## Appendix 1

### *National characteristics of the 2007–2013 Leader programme*

	National strategic programme of which the Leader Programme is a part (programmes implemented on the legal basis of Directive No. 1698/2005)	Funding	Objectives of the Leader programme	Measures taken into account and actions conducted within the framework of the Leader programme
Czech Republic	Axis IV of the Rural Development Programme (RDR)	<p>Axis 4 received €175 million, €140 million of which came from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, with the other approximately 20% from the national budget). In total, the Leader Axis accounts for only 5% of the budget allocated to rural development in the Czech Republic.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– implementing local development strategies and elaboration of local partnerships</li> <li>– improving management and administrative skills in rural areas</li> <li>– providing aid to Local Action Groups.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– improving the quality of life in rural areas</li> <li>– boosting economic potential</li> <li>– exploiting rural, natural and culture heritage</li> </ul>
Lithuania	Axis IV of the 2007–2013 Countryside Development Programme	<p>Leader Axis 4 accounts for €137 million (or 6.6% of the total budget of the Lithuanian local development policy), 92% of which is dedicated to the implementation of integrated strategies, 3% to national and international cooperation, and 5% to supporting training programmes for Local Action Groups.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– implementing integrated local development strategies</li> <li>– supporting national and international cooperation</li> <li>– helping Local Action Groups to acquire and apply practices (operational support, support in terms of preparing integrated strategies, support for training programmes for Local Action Group managers, support for project developers)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– smoothing the transition to non-agricultural activities (beneficiaries: farmers, micro-enterprises)</li> <li>– helping to set up and develop enterprises (beneficiaries: the resident population, micro-enterprises)</li> <li>– helping to develop rural tourism (beneficiaries: farmers, the resident population)</li> <li>– supporting the renovation of villages (beneficiaries: local authorities, NGOs and other moral persons) (70% of the budgets must be scheduled to meet this measure).</li> </ul>

Cont. Appendix I

	National strategic programme of which the Leader Programme is a part (programmes implemented on the legal basis of Directive No. 1698/2005)	Funding	Objectives of the Leader programme	Measures taken into account and actions conducted within the framework of the Leader programme
Hungary	<p>Axis IV of the New Hungary Rural Development Strategy.</p>	<p>The 4<sup>th</sup> Leader axis has a total budget of 20 billion forints. On average, each Local Action Group disposes of €1 million to cover operating costs and €7 million to implement its strategy. In Hungary, the budget allocated to rural development accounts for only 10% of the regional development budget</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- implementing and carrying out Local Action Group development strategies</li> <li>- helping to develop innovative projects</li> <li>- monitoring the development of projects</li> <li>- ensuring effective communication between the micro-regions and the various municipalities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- helping to develop very small companies (beneficiaries: enterprises)</li> <li>- helping to develop the tourist sector (beneficiaries: enterprises)</li> <li>- renovating villages and promoting cultural heritage (beneficiaries: local authorities and associations)</li> <li>- renovating buildings protected by the State (beneficiaries: local authorities)</li> </ul>

## Appendix 2

### *Leader 2007–2013 procedure*

	Size and regulatory parameters of the Local Action Groups	Management organ for the procedure	Local Action Group selection procedure	Methodology applied in elaborating the strategy
Czech Republic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The population of the Local Action Group territory must be between 10,000 and 100,000 inhabitants, excluding towns of over 25,000 inhabitants</li> <li>- Local Action Groups must be inscribed within the framework of the micro-regions (without necessarily having to correspond to them)</li> <li>- The parameter must include the land registries of all the municipalities involved in the Local Action Group.</li> <li>- The Local Action Group territory must be continuous and have common characteristics and problems.</li> <li>- The Local Action Group territory must be coherent and provide a sufficient critical mass of human, financial and economic resources required to support a sustainable development strategy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ministry of Agriculture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Local Action Groups are selected by means of competitions organised following calls for tender launched by the Ministry of Agriculture.</li> <li>- The project selection commission is part of a commission constituted by the Ministry of Agriculture. It includes representatives of NGOs, research institutions (the Institute of Agricultural Economics, VUZE) and experts designated by the regions (chosen outside the framework of the Local Action Groups)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No specific methodology, but training programmes for micro-region managers.</li> </ul>

Cont. Appendix 2

	Size and regulatory parameters of the Local Action Groups	Management organ for the procedure	Local Action Group selection procedure	Methodology applied in elaborating the strategy
Lithuania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Local Action Groups must have between 5,000 and 150,000 inhabitants, including towns of less than 6,000 inhabitants.</li> <li>- It is preferable that the Local Action Group corresponds to a single <i>savivaldybė</i>.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ministry of Agriculture</li> <li>- National Payment Agency (which manages and selects Local Action Group strategies).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In Lithuania there is no competition or selection process properly so-called; theoretically, any territory that so desires can become a Local Action Group, with the proviso that it respects size and partnership criteria.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No specific methodology, but recommendations and financial aid provided to Local Action Groups by the Ministry.</li> </ul>
Hungary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Within the framework of an informal campaign, the Ministry of Agriculture, responsible for the national New Hungary Rural Development Programme encouraged the development of large local communities by suggesting that it favoured large Local Action Groups over smaller project territories. Thus, generally speaking, under pressure from the Ministry, the Local Action Groups were composed of two micro-regions, corresponding approximately to the country's electoral circumscriptions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ministry of Agriculture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Competition for Rural Development Offices in each micro-region. The Offices set up local communities which elaborate their own strategies.</li> <li>- The strategy is submitted for assessment to the Ministry of Agriculture with no real competition.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Specific national methodology. The elaboration of local development strategies is framed by Regulation No. 93/2007 of the New Hungary Rural Development Programme.</li> </ul>

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