

OPERATION OF THE SELECTED LOCAL ACTION GROUP

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Abstract

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The main objective of this article is to compare the current operation of elected local action group with the concept of learning regions. This comparison is built on detailed knowledge and understanding of the operation of local action group Podbrněnsko citizens' association (Podbrněnsko CA) and learning regions in general. The following is assumed: the understanding of community-based processes from the perspective of residents, the important stakeholders who influence the operation of communities or locations. The operation of local action groups is in line with the current concept led by local community development (community led local development, CLLD), which uses elements of the LEADER method. In this method the solution of development problems comes primarily from the inside, not from the outside of the studied territory. The methods used for the collection of empirical data were mostly observation and interviews with all partners involved in LAG (31 people), all mayors in LAG (29 people) and 176 people from region, i.e. methods, which result in so called deep data. Between the primary techniques applied in the research are: participant observation, unstructured or semi-structured interviews and public debates.

Keywords: learning region, LAG, LEADER/CLLD, networking, bottom-up approach, governance

INTRODUCTION

The concept of learning regions is based on the institutional economics, and it deals with (but is not limited to) the influence of culture, networking, perception, interactions and other soft factors on local development. It doesn't give definite results, but it is appreciated for its ability to describe very well the models of economic growth. It is close to the evolutionary concept of social development (Blažek, Uhlíř, 2002).

For the most of the 20th century, in the field of national as well as regional growth, emphasis was put on natural resources collection, material production and long-term consumption put both on the field of national and regional growth. The use of comparative advantages was crucial. But a new era which adheres to the theory worships the theory of learning regions dawned in the late century. It was necessary to define regions, which would be

constantly improved and primarily intensively developed using their knowledge, new ideas, so that they always remain in the learning process. To achieve this, they had to focus on changing the existing infrastructure to facilitate the flow of knowledge, ideas, and the process of learning. These regions are becoming the main instrument of competitiveness in the world where the increasing importance is attributed to new knowledge. It is precisely this knowledge and continuous learning which represent the key inputs for the creation of innovations (Rocková, 2011).

The term learning region has not been clearly defined. It is because each author dealing with this issue understands learning regions a little bit differently. Thus a variety of definitions was created. But of course all of them agree on the fundamental factor that the knowledge, creation and application of innovations as well as the ability to learn are

the driving forces of competitiveness. The aim of this work is to compare this concept with the current practice.

According to Asheim and Isaksen (2001), it is necessary to understand the learning region as an organised co-operation of many civil society organizations, companies, institutions and public authorities embedded in social and regional structures.

Applicability of regional development theories based on institutional economics with appropriate operation of local action groups is suitable for monitoring and it is crucial for exciting of endogenous capital (Konečný *et al.*, 2012), local culture, improvement of relations, communication, networking, strengthening of learning, perception and for LEADER/CLLD method skills adoption. It is about the capture of exogenous impulses which in total positive synergy may lead to the development of the region. This process is not simple at all. Up to this day, many rural areas and their inhabitants have not fulfilled this process, even though there has been some positive shift.

The main author of this paper actively participates in the local government and council of Nosislav. Current problems and vision of rural development have been consulted from 2003 to 2006 during the participation. In 2006 he was elected as a representative of Nosislav, i. a. due to a previous three-year activity, when he worked in this small town as a consultant. As part of this job, he acquainted himself with the relevant topics, questions, and activities of mayors, local inhabitants, businessmen and non-profit organizations. In 2010 he was elected as a representative and subsequently at the establishing local government as a councillor and chairman of Nosislav Financial Committee. This gave him much more detailed insight in the processes within the local development planning. The gradual process of research and participation still continues. In 2013, he was elected as a member of the newly established local action group Executive Board, which is currently learning the LEADER/CLLD method applied in his doctoral thesis. This condition is optimal for the present research.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Kulhánek (2007) defines the learning region as a process of constantly continuing investment, a step towards the integration of all regional subsystems and institutions to the form of long-term operating process of mutual learning and innovation. The concept of learning regions is understood by this author as a certain doctrine of regional development. The most significant achievement of this doctrine is the human capital development and support for regional networks.

Hájková and Hájek (2009) work on the assumption that the competitiveness of modern organization is based on knowledge and they understand the concept

of learning regions as a way to mobilize and use the potential of individual regional stakeholders.

According to Skokan (2005), a learning region is such one in which the condition of cooperation among all stakeholders in the region is fulfilled. This cooperation must be close. Learning regions are created by combining collective political decisions and local activities from the bottom up.

The methodology of this work is based on the qualitative research methods (Cloke *et al.*, 2008). A key concept used at this stage was networking (De Rooij, 2006) and mutual interaction of leaders and affected people (Murdoch, 2000). Their importance is growing in economic recession periods (Chalupa, Hübelová, 2012).

The authors of this paper use mainly qualitative research approaches, whose capabilities contribute to the knowledge about socially constructed reality. Complementarity between both approaches naturally leads to their combinations and gained results complement each other.

After the year 2000, where the worldwide qualitatively-oriented research is in the period of methodological conflicts, the importance of so-called mixed research is rising, i.e. the application of quantitative and qualitative methods, techniques or paradigms in one study (e.g. Tashakkori, Teddlie, 1998 and 2003).

The research topic is not static. For the comparison it mixed inspirational to use the abduction method (Holt-Jensen, 2001), Giddens' theory of structuration (1986) or the methods of Max Weber, who assumes that if we understand the meaning and importance of man's actions, the process of social interaction, we will understand social reality. Berger and Luckmann (1999) draw attention to the social dimension of space, crossing the various spheres of activity covered by other people. Also significant is the opinion of Cloke *et al.* (2005), who considers the spaciousness to be socially constructed and experienced space. In addition to physical and mental space, Lefebvre (1991) also mentions the social space and spatial practices – he speaks about so-called represented area. Bourdieu (1998) perceives social space as an area in which stakeholders are distributed according to their positions.

In mid 1990s, Cloke (1997a, in Woods, 2005) presented a list of four areas, which reflect the influence of cultural studies on culture change: natural-social relations, discourses of rural experience and imagination, the symbolic texts of rural culture and mobility in rural areas. In the late 20th century, a new paradigm appeared in rural studies, which is set to replace the previous approach from the top-down (based on the outside-exogenous development) to bottom-up on the basis of endogenous development (rising from the inside using participation of local citizens, setting up local action groups, etc.).

The new approach prefers interests of the local communities. There is an evident shift from

the government to governance. The state is intended to serve as an instrument of communities to facilitate and manage their own territory. Community involvement in addressing sustainable issues is absolutely essential, and it is in accordance with the principles of subsidiarity.

Berger and Luckmann (1999) stated that a community is a construction as well as an individual is an individual creation of the community. The community therefore cannot be separated from its members and neither can the members be separated from communities. Individual members of the community have intense interactions among themselves which connect them, e.g. a common past – shared experience, knowledge, interests, identical faith and value orientation. Community members are dependent on one another to a certain extent, therefore they cooperate, e.g. they seek how to protect their territory, values, and they strive to contribute to collective prosperity.

Identity/ownership of the place is crucial for earning regions. Identity contributes to the participation of individual stakeholders in the community-based processes, whether in the positive or negative form. The term identity is closely linked with the concept of place perception, e.g. in the work of American geographer Tuan (1990), British geographer Agnew (1996) and Cloke *et al.* (2004). Identity is also a manner in which the community members and also the community itself define themselves in relation to others. Thompson (2004) talks about so-called identification aspect. It contains two ways in which identity is created – self-perception and collective identity. Self-perception refers to the way how an individual describes himself. On the other hand, collective identity refers to the way an individual perceives himself as a member of social group. Identity is not a static, but a dynamic process, created by everyday interactions of people living in a given territory. It depends on many factors and it is variable.

We should bear in mind that identity is a social product, which can be relatively stable in space and time, but it can also change and wane. It is exposed to internal as well as external pressures. Internal pressures are mostly coming from the community itself, while the external can be represented e.g. by media or economic and political intentions.

Some elements of stakeholders' identity are visible and understandable also by outsiders. However, deep layers of identity, which are of intangible nature, are often revealed only in long-term researches (Svozil, 2009; Binek *et al.*, 2006, 2009). A long-term research which started in 2003 has showed that local people's as well as leaders' sense of identity, and also the sense of belonging to the place of residence, can be very strong. This can support the future development of local action groups, but at the same time it can also be a hinderance, e.g. in obstructing further development of examined territory, in promoting individual interests at the expense of collective ones. With some

exceptions, the local people feel certain difficulty to specify bond to this territory. It suggests relatively high stability of the local action group area (or LAG) Podbrnensko CA in Southmoravian region.

Among the key authors dealing with detailed analysis of power undoubtedly is Michel Foucault, encouraging the study of power in historical context. He discusses the discourse e.g. in his *Archeology of Knowledge* (Foucault, 2002), where he reveals the mechanisms of discourse production. His reflections on the intrusion of power to the discourse are also inspiring. It is the discourse that affects and moulds our action. But on the other hand, our action, characterised by the discourse, is establishing it. Simply put, it can be said that truth belongs to those who have power.

In this context Foucault (2002) also mentions truth regimes, existing in all societies that are also produced by those who have power. According to Foucault, the power is non-negotiable, stable, but evolving and transitional. The discourse, which is subordinated to power, can become subject to criticism. This may cause significant change.

In general sense of the word, power means the ability to act, taking steps in order to achieve personal goals and implement one's own interests, i.e. the ability to enter events and influence their outcome. When applying power, individuals use resources that are available to them (Thompson, 2004). According to Weber (in Mills, 2002) the power derives from the application of personal will over the resistance of others. Bourdieu (1998) describes global social space as a force (power) field and at the same time as a battle field, where the stakeholders with different aims meet one another, and thereby contribute to its preservation and change. While Griffin (1990, in Hendl, 2005) indicates that the society is composed of groups with power and privileges, and of the groups without them. He also notes that social institutions maintain the status quo of imbalance between groups in society. From this follows that the privileged are trying to maintain their position of power, while the non-privileged desire for change. It produces tension and causes conflicts (Svozil, 2009).

Intrusion of the internal power fields, revelation of power mechanisms, meant to participate in the public activities that produce roles or positions from 2003. By means of these positions, the community was positively influenced and it has an impact on the operation of the local action group. It meant to become a member of the community. Resistance, naturally produced by power, was revealed together with the disclosure of power fields. Power is formed by power fields pervading from the inside of communities as well as from the outside. The more penetrable these fields are, the more difficult it is to exercise absolute power over a particular site or region. Today's main model of power is that the one who has power has an access to information.

The methods used for the collection of empirical data were mostly observation and interviews with all partners involved in LAG (31 people), all mayors in LAG (29 people) and 176 people from region, i.e. methods, which result in so called deep data (Cloeke *et al.*, 2004). Between the primary techniques applied in the research are: participant observation, unstructured or semi-structured interviews and public debates.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

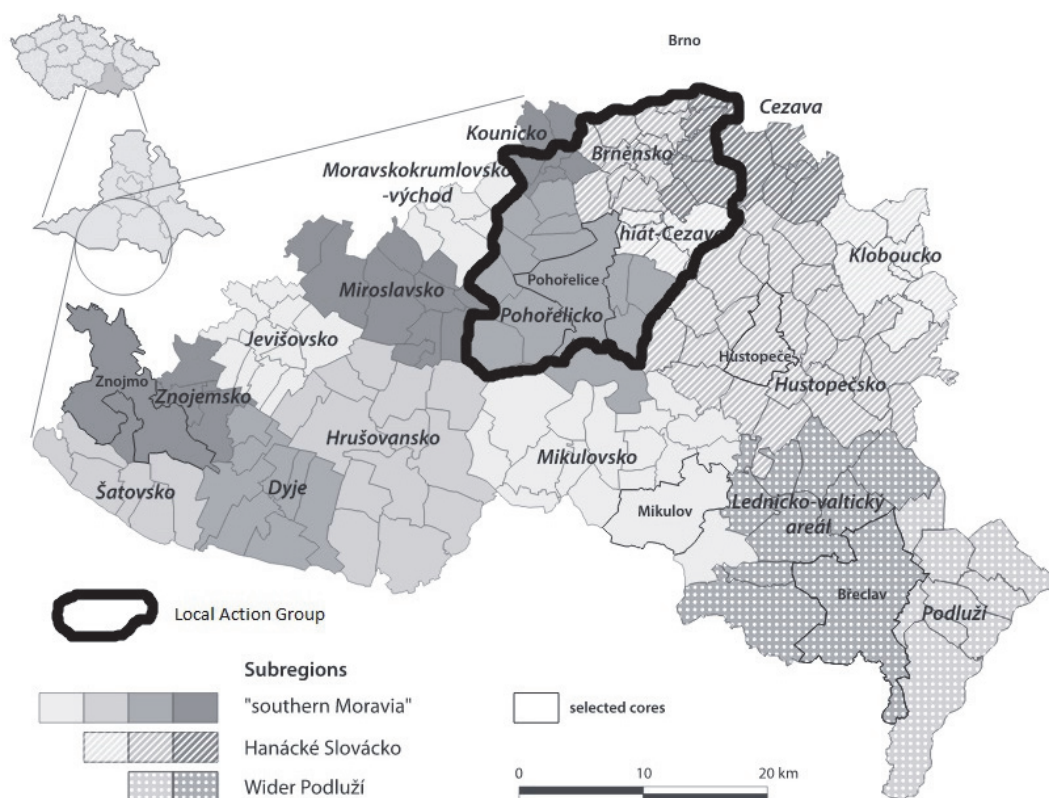
Field work allows verification of what people say and what they really do. Validity of qualitative research was verified by triangulation. The pioneers of this method are Denzin *et al.* (1994). Triangulation encourages regular revision of current outcomes and their potential modifications. Triangulation was used during the cooperation as a principal method leading to the enrichment and completion of the research results.

The validity of interviews was controlled by triangulation (Denzin *et al.*, 1994), conducting an identical survey with the same target group, but using different techniques, comparing data using different factors etc. Content analysis of documents available in the LEADER programme and CLLD method was used as a secondary technique.

LAG Podbrněnsko CA is a newly founded local action group. It was established on 1st January 2013.

On 8th March 2013 LAG Podbrněnsko CA submitted a request for subsidy from the Rural Development Programme, Procurement III. 4.1 Skills acquisition, animation and implementation. They are headquartered on the Vídenská street 699, 691 23 Pohorelice. There is currently 37 193 inhabitants incorporated under its territorial scope. The local action group has 31 members. 8 of them come from the public sector, 11 from the private sector and 12 members are from the non-profit sector.

Until last year, there was not any local partnership in the south of Brno. There is a number of micro regions expecting with enthusiasm the creation of project collaboration platform. But over time, the joint projects were limited mostly to building cycling tracks and publishing promotional products, which does not amount too much. The reason for this is both ever decreasing financial support for micro regions from municipalities' shared tax contributions (Andrlík, 2012) as well as their own limitedness in being a mere partnership between authorities, not affecting wider range of society. First discussions on local partnerships establishment were held as early as in 2004 and in the subsequent years, but only in 2012 were they aimed at specific activities leading to the establishment Podbrněnsko CA. The aim of this local action group is to promote sustainable development of the territory by way of cooperation.



1: Regional authority of Jihomoravský kraj (South Moravian region in the Czech Republic) and researched area (southern part)
Source: <http://www.kr-jihomoravsky.cz/> [10. 10. 2010], own elaboration

The territory of LAG Podbrněnsko CA includes the area of Zidlochovice, Pohorelice and Rajhrad. Since long ago, most of the territory has been connected by way of the administrative arrangement (historical districts, the present municipalities with extended powers and is characterised by a similar character – a lowland valley basin stretching to the south of Brno between undulating landscape of Hustopečsko in the east and Moravsko-Kumlovsko in the west. The common factor is also the proximity of the Moravian metropolis, Brno, which has a significant impact on the surrounding suburban area. This impact is also negative – it weakens the distinctness of surrounding regions.

As a new LAG, Podbrněnsko CA does not have sufficient experience with the community-

based work – cooperation with entrepreneurs is mostly based on the information provided by local authorities. Social services were planned on community basis, but neither in this case was established a long-term partnership. In 2013 the most successful has been the Zidlochovice city, organizing for the first time farmers' markets with the support for local producers. Parts of the preparation for these markets were meetings with producers who have a major interest in such activities and they want to take part (in particular in local product markets and regional products labelling). Thus the participatory learning method brings about the first partial successes.

CONCLUSION

Acquiring project activity skills and gaining experience with the community approach from cooperating LAGs are a precondition for the functional local partnerships establishment and implementing the associations' objectives. At the beginning, the association needed to analyse and define development areas, essential to ensure the sustainable development of the region and to determine the main objectives and priorities of the development strategy (Integrated territorial strategy). The public had been involved in about the default conditions as well as priorities for development. The preparation of strategy was carried out by our own efforts with the assistance of experts. LAG currently needs to determine the rules for strategy implementation and to create and approve the implementation structure. There it needs to acquire the principles of LEADER/CLLD method more efficiently and to get more practical experience as well.

The application of LEADER/CLLD method and a comparison of this method with the concept of learning regions are very topical. The local action group and the LEADER/CLLD method are to play a more important role in the forthcoming programming period. It is expected that the impacts of local development organized this way by will be much higher. The LEADER/CLLD method and local action groups should have better access to the Structural Funds and to the Rural Development Fund. However, it is not crucial for their cooperation. After the assessment of the available information, the local action group does not seem to be a purely special-purpose alliance, artificially created especially for the purpose of subsidy management and gaining resources from the national and European funds (Bínek *et al.*, 2006, 2009).

The theory of learning regions emphasizes the importance of local relations and the minimum distance between the individual entities. It also states that the main reason for grouping of entities in space may not be the need for making their interaction, but the desire to acquire and use specific socio-cultural resources of the region (e.g. traditions, expectations, personal motivation, collective visions, strong leaders and enthusiasm). There is some lack in the creation of networks. It can be assumed that it is not possible to focus only on the internal networks and relations within them, but it is also necessary to pay attention to relations between the regional system and the outer environment (Rocková, 2011).

Since the learning region is situated in a particular environment, it is not immune to its surroundings, whether in terms of global factors or activities of neighbouring regions affecting its status and competitiveness. In its origin, but also during its existence, the learning region needs constant impulses. Very important role is played by continuous innovation of a learning process – in particular the ability to come up with new learning methods. This learning can be observed using qualitative methods mentioned above.

The local action group Podbrněnsko CA was founded in early 2013. Currently the local action group does not have quite sufficient information and is not very familiar the LEADER/CLLD method. This may improve rapidly in the coming years.

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