



Social innovation, funding and resources

LEADER case study Social Innovation – implicit to the LEADER approach

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In the national Evaluation Plan for LEADER (2014 -2020), the Austrian Managing Authority included a number of key thematic studies to advance rural development. One of the studies concerned social innovation, its relevance in LEADER projects and its effects on different age and disadvantaged groups across all Local Action Groups (LAGs) in Austria.

In 2018, a team of independent consultancies (ÖAR and ZSI) was commissioned to undertake the study. This defined 'social innovation' as approaches that facilitate the improvement of relationships and the quality of life of people through the creation of new forms of cooperation between public, economic and societal actors.

The research was extensive and demanded a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. In total, 1 628 project descriptions were analysed on which basis eight detailed 'Social Innovation' case studies were elaborated. Finally, trans-regional focus groups facilitated the sharing of experience, exploring the topic in greater depth across LAGs.

The study found that between a sixth (17%) and a third (33%) of all projects in Austria addressed social innovation issues, the first estimation based on experts' views, the second one on a self-assessment of LAG managers. However, instead of using the term 'social innovation' explicitly, project descriptions more commonly referred to 'social capital', 'social inclusion', 'social cohesion', 'trans-generational', etc.

Similar observations were made regarding LAG strategies and the actions of LAG staff in the field (animation, facilitation, support). While not specifically referring to 'social innovation', much of their focus and activities related directly to its principles. In fact, the study concludes that the LEADER approach itself (if applied in its proper sense: locally, inclusively, cohesively, integrated, multi-dimensional, cross-sectorial, innovatively) implicitly incorporates the essence of social innovation, hence making it more likely to emerge. This makes LEADER one of the most appropriate and successful approaches in bringing about social innovation.

When LAG strategies explicitly identified 'social innovation' as one of their aims, their activities and staff showed stronger engagement and know-how in the subject matter. At times, LAGs even took on the role of 'social entrepreneur' themselves by connecting with relevant institutions, facilitating dialogue and exchange, and working in partnership on relevant social issues. These findings demonstrate that LAGs can occupy an important position in pro-actively pursuing social innovation and achieve significant effect.



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The majority of social innovation projects (63%) focused simultaneously on impacting on the regional economy (54% of these related to mobility topics).

The study identified important lessons learned, including:

- Addressing social issues is a long-term ambition usually requiring a sequence of projects and often more than one programming period to achieve lasting change.
- The relevance of acknowledging small 'wins' along the way is an important motivator for all involved.
- LAGs benefit from staying flexible, creative, and open-minded towards new developments to serve their communities best.
- Allowing the LEADER approach to be implemented as intended provides a suitable platform for social innovation to grow.
- The use of innovation promoters enhances a culture of free thinking, creating unconventional connections, and sensing opportunities for social innovation.

The findings of the study are currently used to inform the design of LEADER and also wider initiatives for the new programming period in Austria.

Further information:

https://www.bmlrt.gv.at/land/laendl_entwicklung/evaluierung/Evaluierungsstudien/Chancengleichheit.html

