



Evropská unie  
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**INBOOX**

# **Evaluation of Benefits of Cooperation Among Actors of Local Action Groups**

## **Executive summary**

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The aim of this public procurement "Evaluation of benefits of cooperation among actors of local action groups" is evaluation of the benefits of a cooperation among local actors and mapping the best practice in local action groups (further LAGs). This public procurement includes two evaluative tasks. The aim of the first evaluative task is to evaluate the benefits of cooperation of LAG actors for a development of territory within the topics of Operational Programme Employment (further OPE) programme framework – employment, social integration, community centres and community social work, social entrepreneurship, and family arrangements. This evaluation is primarily made on basis of data collected from LAG managers, representatives of municipalities, representatives of non-governmental organizations (further NGO) and representatives of entrepreneurial sector by means of three focus groups.

The aim of the second evaluative task is to capture the good practice of the functioning of the cooperation among the local actors on LAG territory within the topics of OPE programme framework (employment, social integration, community centres and community social work, social entrepreneurship, and family arrangements). Three case studies were made within this task, based on an interview with LAG project managers on a cooperation of local actors on LAG territory.

## **Evaluative task 1 – Evaluation of the benefits of cooperation among LAG actors for a development of territory within the topics of OPE programme framework.**

All three groups of actors considered local action groups as an useful instrument not only in the framework of OPE but also in other areas, because they significantly contribute to meetings of all relevant actors on the territory.

### **1) Cooperation of actors on LAG territory**

NGOs are the most active actors and entrepreneurial sector is the least active within the programme framework of OPE on LAG territory. All the participants of all focus groups talked about reciprocally advantageous cooperation and support in case of municipalities. Regarding the extent of involvement in affairs of relevant actors on LAG territory, this extent is directly dependent on their capacity and their priorities. Entrepreneurial sector has been participating in case OPE can offer to it something that can be developing for it. However, social entrepreneurship is often considered as a great burden with uncertain result. Therefore, part of LAGs solve the same problems by means of gradual employment. The involvement of non-profit organizations is the easiest practicable because they have the most direct interest in programme framework and its focus on social themes. There is also an advantage for them that is easier to be successful with the project in a smaller competition through LAG in given area than in a big state-wide competition. The reason of participation of concrete actors (in focus groups with enterprisers and NGO representatives) was the development of their entrepreneurship on one hand and the implementation of social work in rural areas and its felt need on the other hand.

Cooperation of actors on LAG territory is more easily practicable in smaller LAGs (geographically, but mainly smaller in a number of inhabitants and involved municipalities) where all the relevant actors know well each other and the information are well spread, although there is a disadvantage in lack of public transport. Regarding mid-size and large LAGs, it becomes apparent as a useful instrument the cooperation with alliances of municipalities and microregions and formation of **LAG contact places** in various several places on the territory. Participants of Focus Group (further FG) considered longer searching of agreement on what is necessary on the territory and carrying it through as a significant disadvantage of bigger LAGs.

According to the participants, the satisfaction level of the cooperation within LAG was influenced also by its composition – the more diverse LAG it was the better reactions it had to real needs of the region. The participants of FG with representatives of municipalities were satisfied with information



about the affairs on LAG territory in general but it could also be caused by the fact that the most of them were active in LAG in some way.

Regarding the future of LAGs in the social area, NGO participants think that without OPE LAGs won't pursue the social inclusion topics, and likewise the LAG's representatives are afraid of losing their members from the social area in the same situation.

## **2) Involvement of municipalities in solving topics of OPE programme framework**

Regarding involvement of municipalities in solving of OPE framework, in the opinion of participants of FG, suitable partners for LAGs are smaller municipalities with the released mayors. Non-released mayors of smaller municipalities have often no capacities to identify and occupy with the social topics connected to OPE, especially when they do not feel social topics as something problematic. Management of bigger towns and municipalities (and it was repeatedly emphasized by several participants of FG) is usually not interested in affairs outside its town and a lot of matters and projects are managed by municipality management itself, so that involvement in LAG is not so advantageous for it.

The main reasons for involvement of municipality in OPE framework were by FG participants presented felt need of community support, professional management and direction from LAG and a reduction of administration burden. Position of "consultant for mayors of smaller municipalities" or "assistant of prevention of social exclusion" had great benefit for them. Purpose of these positions was to offer support in a social area to those mayors who have no capacity to deal with these problems and to direct them to help their inhabitants to solve their situation directly. Support of **social work in municipality** was considered as a significant benefit of LAG activity. There are a few possibilities how to deal with the situation for smaller municipalities, that from the regional point of view, do not reach for this type of the service. They can approach a social department in the relevant municipality with extended powers or have a position of a shared social worker with other municipalities or LAG will manage to extend the scope of non-profit organizations from the nearest city also to municipalities in its surrounding. The least possibility is to reach a social worker from the municipality with extended powers because these workers are mostly overly busy by their work in a relevant municipality.

FG participants included among the main barriers of involvement of municipalities workload of mayors, no interest in deal with social problems or the feeling that they will manage the necessary needs by themselves. There were mentioned other reasons such as problematic explanation of OPE topics and especially social consultancy for voters, also a great administrative load of projects in OPE framework and a lack of personal capacity of municipality that could engage in OPE programme framework.

## **3) Value added of Community-led Local Development (further only CLLD) instrument and fulfilling of CLLD strategy**

**CLLD instrument** with all its aspects, i.e. knowledge of needs of inhabitants and specific target groups, knowledge of local actors and their coordination and networking, relations with management of municipalities and relations with wide public and their activation, **contributes to the fact that action plans are practicable and can really react to needs of people living in the territory.**

According to FG participants, it is possible to consider as an advantage of active cooperation within the LAG framework that LAGs has **become significant regional partners** for a long-term and sustainable communication and cooperation. LAGs represent **a platform** that make the communication easier and bring the opportunity for mayors and other representatives of other organizations and active citizens to **meet** each other during various events and **to find an agreement** regarding priorities of their region. Local actors do not compete but they **cooperate**. LAGs educate mayors in long-term period regarding social inclusion topic and **support organization** that would not have enough courage or know-how for a realization of projects otherwise.



**Knowledge of local network and proactive approach** of LAG workers was identified as a condition for a successful and long-term partnership within LAG. From the point of view of FG participants, other benefits of cooperation in OPE programme framework with LAG were support of local community thank to knowledge of its concrete needs, opportunity to realize smaller projects in smaller municipalities and also spread knowledge about the need of prevention and solution of social exclusion among mayors. In some cases, FG participants appreciated lower administrative burden and also opportunity to acquire funds from Integrated regional operational programme (further only IROP) and OPE in co-ordinated and integrated way.

Other important benefits were coordination and **better effectiveness** of realized projects because there was an opportunity to cooperate with other organizations on the same problems in territory, although they were competitors in competitions in programme calls before. According to some FG participants LAGs also **cultivated relations** among actors in their territory – they supported dialogue and understanding (e. g. bigger cities and municipalities help the smaller ones).

LAGs from FG paid a big attention to creation of **CLLD strategy and action plans**, mostly also via realizations of FG with local actors. Some respondents from NGO suspect LAG of being active in a social area only because of funds from OPE and newly from OPE+. LAG managers, on the contrary, proudly announced to fulfil their action plans, to find out the needs in their territory and consequently to realize them, even though it should mean to arrange a social service by themselves. Of course, there are some differences among LAGs, they were obvious, for example, even during preparation of projects – on one hand the respondents talked about the fact that no projects would be created without LAG's help and on the other hand that other LAG had no experience with social area and actually it was not able to help with a preparation of the project.

Regarding newly solved problems and newly involved actors, some of them has started with social entrepreneurship. There was newly supported gradual employment in employment area – according to respondent they were not new actors in fact, but they did not pay attention to gradual employment till that time, so that it was a new solution of the employment problem of disadvantaged people. Elsewhere, they succeeded with a reconstruction of a caste and made a community centre from it so that it attracted a lot of new non-profit organizations. Sharing of social workers operating in a few municipalities at the same time and also innovative social organization safely supporting beginning entrepreneurs are significant new elements. We can also include **pandemic and refugee crisis** among newly solved problems. Regarding pandemic, it became apparent, that innovative project of social work in countryside, that was active outside the official network of social services, got the opportunity to do a fieldwork and to help people even during the strictest measures. A flow of refugees from Ukraine checked out the capacity and the strongness of local communities. Another interesting newly carried out activity was an arrangement of social worker being active at schools whose meaning was to catch the potential problem at the beginning. There were some cases when LAG intensively tried to expand regional network of social services. There was one case when they even founded the service as a non-profit organization of the municipality by themselves.

**As new connections** it is considered active involvement of mayors of smaller municipalities and their bigger awareness about social area and mainly the fact that they have someone or know someone who they can turn to in case of their need. There was a different case when LAG arranged for municipality the cooperation with Agency for social inclusion and this cooperation contributed to the change in a social climate on whole. Another project in employment area concerned agriculture and LAG meant a great support for an applicant. At the same time, regarding this case, NGO extended its activities from the city to the countryside – there was established a new cooperation with university and they become an example of the good practice – it was another new connection of actors helping on a complex solution.

Regarding OPE+ and the fact that LAG will submit the key projects on behalf of their territories, it is possible to say, that municipalities very appreciated the fact that they can gain advantages and disadvantages of administrative load and the worries with personal capacity will stay in LAG



competence. Whereas LAGs appreciate that they can choose the partner and focus on what is the most necessary in the territory. It was seen as a problematic matter by some NGO participants, because they were worried that LAGs will follow only their interests or interests of a few actors and realized projects will not be beneficial for a whole territory, however, the most of FG participants appreciated LAGs a lot.

## **Recommendations**

Based on data collected from focus groups there are defined the recommendations that could contribute to improvement in processes of setting cooperation and formation of local partnerships in CLLD framework in a new programme period 2021-2027.

- Support a greater involvement of entrepreneurial sector in LAGs activities (e. g. by gradual employment or Corporate Social Responsibility).
- It is necessary to arrange a better coordination of LAGs activities with regions in order to take into consideration also needs of smaller municipalities in regional plans (**based on data** from LAGs). Further, also to support community planning of social services of LAGs. And possibly also involvement of LAGs in community planning of social services on the regional level or the level of municipality with extended powers.
- Another requirement was provision of possibility of **cooperation among several LAGs** on a solution of a specific common problem.
- It would be appropriate to provide a better **synergy** between investment and non-investment projects by better coordination between responsible authorities, and mainly to provide a possibility of continuation of **proved innovative projects**. For example, community centre projects, that aim for support of whole community and various target groups too, appeared as a suitable space for this kind of synergy.
- Part of respondents interceded for at least a partial **subsequent support** for social enterprises and also for some releasing of conditions in order more applicants can fulfil them, whereas the most demanding condition was considered arranging the operation of social enterprises after the termination of support from the project.
- LAG projects and activities are also appropriate for **a support of development of social work** (and also another forms of support and help from community to persons threatened by social exclusion) in areas where social workers of municipality with extended powers and social services have not such a reach so far.
- In terms of the projects of municipalities, a **support of development of strategies** and methodical support was suggested in order a cooperation with LAG in OPE framework not to be dependent on concrete people and threatened by possible changes in the local elections. Regarding this, it was also called for a support of accountants in smaller municipalities that have very limited experience with project accounting.
- Another important impulse was, to have **looser rules** of evaluation for overarching key projects of LAGs, and so not to be "obligated by detailed definiteness", that may not be fulfilled, or it will come out during programme period the fact that is necessary to solve different matters with priority (such as pandemic or consequences of war in Ukraine).



## **Evaluative task 2 – Case study capturing the good practice of functioning of cooperation among local actors in territory of 3 selected LAGs in OPE programme framework**

In the frame of the second evaluative task 3 selected LAGs were analysed: LAG Šumperský venkov, LAG Brdy-Vltava and LAG Orlicko.

### **1. LAG Šumperský venkov**

LAG Šumperský venkov was founded in 2006. During its existence LAG Šumperský venkov supported more than 200 projects from various operational programmes of value more than 51 million CZK. In terms of LAG activities during period of 2014-2020, 3 targets in thematic areas of OPE programme framework, namely in area of **employment, social services and family arrangements** has been solved.

LAG Šumperský venkov emphasises on involvement of all actors in a process of formation of Community-Led Local Development Strategy (further only SCLLD). Cooperation of local actors in thematic areas of OPE programme framework runs in form of community discussion: by discussion of LAG bodies, events for a wide public, researches and forms of comments. Cooperation of local actors also runs during preparation and realization of projects funded by OPE.

The main motivation for a cooperation of local actors is easier possibility to gain funds for a project for a development of territory. LAG can also cover interconnected projects that gain funds from several operational programmes and funds – the possibility of **funds combination** is important for **integrated solutions** of problems in territory. Further motivation is possibility **to try to do the things in a different way** that is by CLLD and LEADER (Links between Actions for the Development of the Rural Economy) enabled. LAG do not support already existing social services but make effort to support an establishment of new social services and try to get these new services into register of social services and arrange their **long-term sustainability**.

LAG Šumperský venkov use supposed advantages of support through CLLD in the framework of concrete solutions of problems belonged to the topics of the OPE programme framework. Knowledge of needs of inhabitants in territory or specific target groups is used in concrete solutions of problems, in strategical planning and in formation of SCLLD. Knowledge of local conditions and local companies and organizations helps even with evaluation of project intents and helps to not let to realize projects that misuse the support. Advantage of use of coordination and networking in territory is overcoming of narrow-minded seeing of the development of territory. Narrow-minded seeing arises from different levels of knowledge about problems in territory and from differences of opinions. Closer relation between management of municipalities and wider public, **activization of community and support of volunteering** bring **credibility and confidence in LAG** and in projects that arise within the activity of this LAG.

### **2. LAG Brdy-Vltava**

Local action group Brdy-Vltava was founded on 4 th of August in 2006. LAG Brdy-Vltava managed to gain 78 994 390 CZK from European funds. During programme period 2014-2020 LAG has been solved topics in the following thematic areas of the OPE programme framework: **in area of prevention of social exclusion, in area of support of employment including social enterprises and support of family arrangements**.

Regarding development of LAG territory within CLLD system in thematic areas of the OPE programme framework, partners of LAG and grant applicants actively cooperate (mainly providers of social services). Cooperation among local actors in thematic areas of the OPE programme framework runs within creation of SCLLD. Local actors cooperate within work groups devoted to social area and within realization of single projects.



**LAG Brdy-Vltava manages to build up long-term sustainable and robust net of local partners.** The main benefit of interconnection of local actors from entrepreneurial, public and non-profit sector lies in a setting of cooperation and communication in areas where the actors would not meet each other otherwise, and in ideas that are arisen after such cooperation and communication.

LAG Brdy-Vltava use supposed advantages of support through CLLD in a framework of concrete solutions of problems belonging to the topics of the OPE programme framework. Knowledge of local need of inhabitants help to effectively support local actors (primarily providers of social services), who will fulfil these needs by means of their services. Advantage of coordination and networking of actors in the LAG Brdy-Vltava territory is improvement of focus and extent of supported projects in order to be whole territory equally covered by social services for all target groups. Neither deficiency in services nor competition arise in case of this cooperation and networking among actors.

### **3. LAG Orlicko**

Active subjects started to search for new structures for creation of comprehensive and long-term system of partnership cooperation in territory for development of region "Orlicko" in 2005. During programme period 2014-2020 in terms of LAG activities, LAG has been solved targets in the following thematic areas of the OPE programme framework: **area of employment and social entrepreneurship, area of social inclusion, community centres and community social services and area of family arrangements.**

Regarding development of LAG Orlicko within CLLD system in thematic areas of the OPE programme framework, **partners of LAG**, grant applicants (mainly providers of social services), non-profit organizations in the territory and wide public actively cooperate. Cooperation among local participants in thematic areas of the OPE programme framework runs in form of meetings of **work groups, discussions, meetings, chats** etc. with representatives of external NGOs existing in LAG Orlicko territory, **events for a wide public** that run within creation and realization of SCLLD.

The main motivation for a cooperation of local participants within CLLD system and involvement in LAG partnership **is opportunity to get involved in development of the territory and to develop his/her organization or to improve quality of service by means of realization of his/her project.** The possibility to join in development of the territory and promotion of LAG among local organizations is helpful for LAG in order to develop its stable **member base.**

The great benefit of interconnection of local actors from entrepreneurial, public and non-profit sector is view all of this spheres on the matter that is solved and on development of the territory as a whole. During the meetings of members there has been creating a platform where actors represent social area with beginning social need (provider of social service, employer etc.). These actors have good knowledge of territory and specifics of this need and they meet other actors who do not belong to this area but they can offer comfortably applicable solutions from a different sphere.

LAG Orlicko use supposed advantages of support through CLLD in a framework of concrete solutions of problems belonged to the topics of the OPE programme framework. **Knowledge of needs** of inhabitants and closer relations with public helps LAG to set up effective cooperation among local actors and select the projects that will fulfil these needs the best. Advantage of coordination and networking of actors in LAG Orlicko territory is also **closer relation with management** of municipality that can be used while solving concrete problems connected with OPE projects.