

# **Integrated Development Strategies – patient papers or powerful plans?**

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## ***Integrated Development Strategies and rural development***

An integrated approach seems to contribute more to a highly complex task like influencing rural development than approaches focussed solely on different sectors. So rural planning has to deal with multi-functionality (Gallent et al. 2008, 19). That's why 'Integrated Rural Development' became a buzzword and accordant planning processes work with 'Integrated Development Strategies' (Brodda 2007, 47). Use a comprehensive territorial development plan, based on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities for and threats to a region is recommended, as is the integration of all measures and projects within the scope of this plan (Terluin 2003, 342f).

However, a generally well known problem is a gap between the written plan and its implementation in the real world. Further, in general, the role of rationality is questioned in planning theory (Schönwandt 2008). This raises the question of how a plan should be elaborated and what should be included to generate a real influence. In this context it is also important to look at the process of making the plan: e.g., involving local stakeholders in a participative planning process can contribute to create a sense of problem ownership and to mobilizing local resources.

Crucial is that the strategy fits the needs of the region and the intentions of the stakeholders (what they want to achieve with such an instrument). In general the requirements for a useful plan depend on the role and tasks the plan should fulfil, as well as on the regional situation. Beyond this, every plan has to face especially two different questions: What do we want and how this can be implemented?

Regarding the planning content ('what') it is obvious that the strategy should be as detailed as necessary to analyse the problems of the region and provide assistance in setting priorities. But it shouldn't go too much into detail, because the effort in making the plan can be too capacious and there is the risk that nobody will really read and use it. Another aspect is that in general it is easier to hide conflicts in a vague wording. This helps to create a consensus and favours the function as a common vision, but of course it is less helpful as a real steering instrument. In fact therefore a major challenge is the translation of good sounding aims to measurable goals.

A problem connected with the 'how' is the degree of binding character (for general discussion about legitimacy in the context of rural governance see Conelly et al. 2006). Usually a strategy can only be a guideline with a self-binding character, without any

statutory authority, so the strategies can only be a guideline. This provides a high level of flexibility, but can also lead to some form of arbitrariness.

Altogether this raises the question whether Integrated Development Strategies generate really great impacts in practice (=powerful plan) or if their main outcome is only paper, which will wait patiently in the drawer. For that purpose results of the evaluation of LEADER (part of European Rural Development Programmes) are taken as an example to discuss this question.

### ***Integrated Development Strategies within the LEADER-approach***

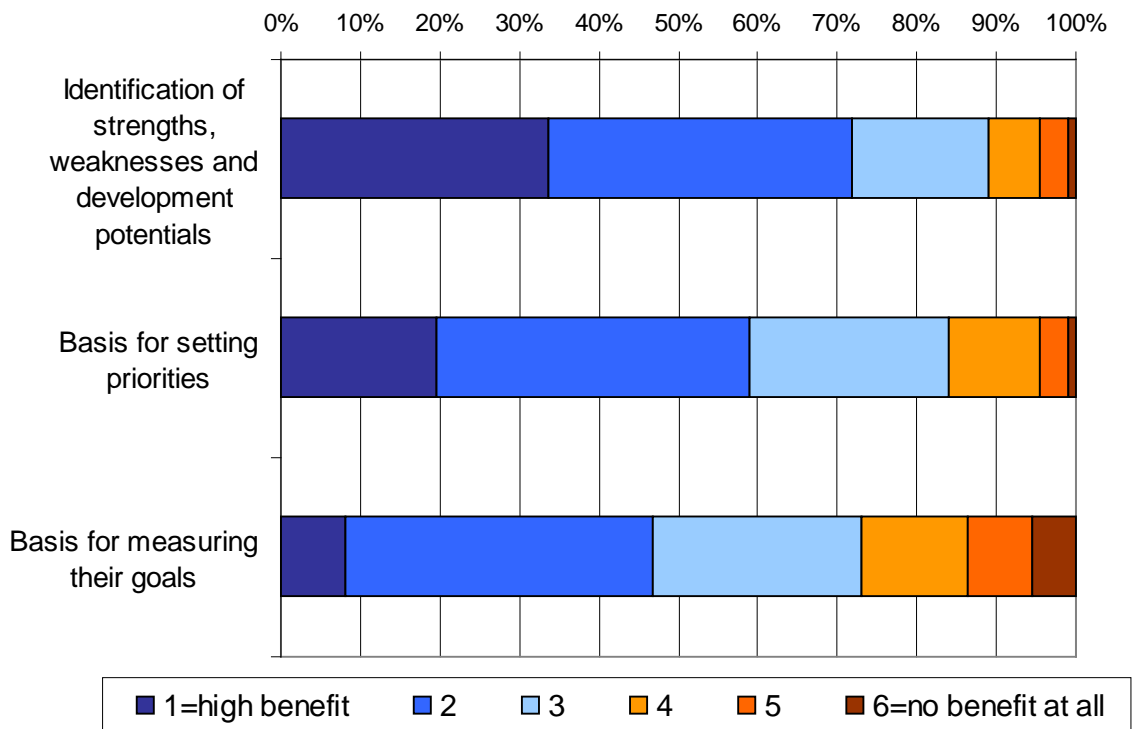
LEADER functions as a bottom-up oriented, participatory approach in rural areas. Mainly these collaborations deal with tourism, diversification of rural economy, agriculture, environmental matters, demographic change and quality of life.

Organisational structures with own budgets are established in every LEADER-region. Therefore different stakeholders come together in a Local Action Group (LAG) as a kind of a public-private partnership and make decisions about the financial support for projects. One crucial basis for these decisions is an 'Integrated Development Strategy,' which has to be included in the general application for this funding scheme. So an Integrated Development Strategy is a central condition. A main task of these strategies is a cross-sectoral approach to rural issues and the utilisation of the specific endogenous potentials, including natural and cultural specialities of the individual region.

Several results from an evaluation in seven federal states in Germany can be used to explore the role of Integrated Development Strategies in the context of LEADER. In this context different methods have been executed. Beyond the analysis of the Integrated Development Strategies, two written questionnaires served as important sources of information. The first is a survey for LAG-members which was used in around 100 LEADER-Regions (altogether 1500 LAG-Members answered, with a good answering rate of 60%) and the second was a survey of the LAG-Managers of these regions. These managers are the main organisational workers for the implementation of the strategy (answering rate over 90%).

### ***Empirical results***

Quite different results in matters of the Integrated Development Strategies will be presented: aspects like „Possibilities for all interested persons to participate” (result of the survey of LAG-members); “Identification of strengths, weaknesses and development potentials,” or “Basis for setting priorities” were rated positively by the respondents. The “Basis for measuring their goals” was rated as less beneficial (survey of LAG-Managers, see figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Benefits for different tasks of the Integrated Development Strategies (rated by LAG-Managers); N=111

Another interesting aspect is to look at differences regarding the success of implementation in the varied fields of action from the development strategies the estimations were clear: especially successful was tourism and with far fewer nominations, some aspects of quality of life. Rather low are often the implementations for agriculture, economy and environmental fields. It was also evident that in some spheres of activity (defined in the strategies by the regions themselves), there were no implementations at all. One reason was that the projects have to overcome two hurdles: first the fitting to the strategy and second the fitting to funding conditions. In some fields, like tourism, both are easy, but especially for innovative projects it is not always possible to overcome the second hurdle.

A further mentionable result was the satisfaction of different kind of stakeholders with the outcomes up to now: as a good sign of integration, it can be summarised that often the overall satisfaction did not differ greatly between actors of different thematic background.

Thus the real implementation was not as cross-sectoral and integrated as the written plans, but with the LEADER approach it was possible to establish a network of different actors working on integrated rural development.

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