

**INVOLVING YOUTH IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT:
LESSONS FROM THE LEADER PROGRAMME IN BANSKÁ
BYSTRICA COUNTY, SLOVAKIA**

By

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Submitted to
Central European University
Department of Public Policy

*In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Public Policy*

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Budapest, Hungary

2012

ABSTRACT

Although the youth involvement in rural development has immense importance for keeping rural communities sustainable, productive and democratic; policies are usually not oriented toward rural youth. The LEADER programme, the special method of integrated rural development aimed at participatory and bottom-up approach, appears to be an ideal way to involve youth in rural development. Hence, this thesis attempts to examine the actual involvement of youth in LEADER programme using the case study of Banská Bystrica county in Slovakia. The results of the research show that there are several opportunities to involve rural youth through the LEADER programme, yet at the same time, the local context and the LEADER design play an important role too.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Professor Andrew Cartwright and to my academic writing instructor John Harbord for their valuable comments and supportive guidance.

It was a pleasure interviewing managers of Local Action Groups in Banská Bystrica country, namely Jana Bačíková, Elena Jankovičová, Miroslava Kubaliaková, Martina Pavlovkinová and Miroslav Žabka; as well as the regional coordinator for Banská Bystrica county Peter Rusnák. I am very thankful for their willingness to cooperate and helpful insight “from the field”.

Furthermore, I thank my family and friends for being my support and inspiration as well as Central European University and International Visegrad Fund for making my endeavour possible.

DECLARATION

I, the undersigned Veronika Korčeková, hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. To the best of my knowledge this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted as part of the requirements of any other academic degree or non-degree program, in English or in any other language.

This is a true copy of the thesis, including final revisions.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CEC	Commission of the European Communities
EC	European Commission
EC/ DG AGRI	European Commission/Directorate General of Agriculture and Rural Development
EARDF	European Agriculture and Rural Development Fund
LAG	Local Action Group
LEADER	“Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale”/ “Links between the rural economy and development actions”
MA SR	Ministry of Agriculture of the Slovak Republic
ME SR	Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic
NNRD	National Network of Rural Development
OZ BB VIPA	Rural Senate in Banská Bystrica county, civil partnership
RO NNRD	Regional Office of the National Network of Rural Development

INTRODUCTION

Young people are a valuable human asset of rural communities, yet their potential is often not recognized. Even though young people deem its rural home attractive and wish to actively participate on its development (Auclair and Vanoni 2004), their role in rural development is often neglected by local policies. Several studies (EC 2008, Moravčíková et al. 2010, ME SR 2010, Roberts 2003, Shucksmith 2004, Tomanovic & Ignjatovic 2006) argue that young people are in a complicated process of transition and they can be considered socially excluded group of rural population in the economic, civic, social and interpersonal sense (Shucksmith 2004, 22-23). This is legitimate reason why rural youth should be specifically addressed by relevant policies. Yet there are also other valid reasons for involving youth in rural development. A youth-led approach does not bring benefits only for young people themselves, but broader rural communities can also considerably gain in terms of promoting integrated and sustainable rural development, tackling depopulation of rural areas, improving local economy and enhancing the quality of local democracy (Dax et al. 2004, Jentsch 2006, Stockdale 2004).

Yet the question remains to what extent relevant policies and policy-makers should struggle to involve youth. Designing specific measures exclusively for young people or defining youth as a target group is not the same as allowing them to take part in decision-making bodies or just listening to their concerns. Moreover, because of the uneven individualization according to gender, social class, occupation or location of young people (Jentsch and Shucksmith 2004, 275) as well as various policies addressing youth, recognizing needs of individuals might be very context-specific and multifaceted.

In light of this policy puzzle, the purpose of this thesis is to investigate the actual extent to which relevant policies should involve youth in rural development, more precisely using the LEADER programme as a case study. As this EU-funded approach seeks to initiate rural

development through the partnership of various stakeholders from rural areas called Local Action Groups (LAGs), it is a prominent example of citizens' active engagement in rural development. This implies that it may be an ideal way of rural youth social inclusion and therefore it offers significant potential for investigating the concern of this thesis.

Considering the gap in literature as regards new EU member states where youth involvement in rural development remains “neglected topic for research and policy”(Shucksmith 2010, 8), researching this issue in this particular region appears to be very important. Slovakia belongs to new EU member states with the highest share of young population¹ (CEC 2009, 9) and with the significant proportion of intermediate and predominantly rural areas² (OECD 2011, 23). Young people are approximately evenly concentrated in urban and rural areas, yet in rural areas they represent higher share of local population approaching 42 %³ (ME SR 2010, 7). Comparing eight Slovak counties⁴, only two of them, Banská Bystrica county together with Nitra county, belong to the category “predominantly rural”(ESPON 2011, 3). Yet, according to the clustering method used by the EU (ECORYS 2010, 23), only Banská Bystrica county is classified as “balanced rural area with declining manufacturing sector", while all other Slovak counties belong to „industrialized Eastern periphery“. This implies that Banská Bystrica county has the comparably highest degree of rural character. Moreover, it has relatively low accessibility of transportation networks and poor informatization (ESPON 2011, 3-21) resulting in economic marginality, high levels of unemployment and persistent out-migration (OECD 2011, 86).

The LEADER⁵ programme has been implemented in Slovakia since 2007 as a separate axis of the National rural development policy (LEADER+ 2007). So far no official evaluation study specifically related to the youth involvement in LEADER programme in Slovakia has been

¹ Together with Poland and Cyprus, while youth is defined as people aged between 15-29 years

² Using the OECD classification of region into predominantly urban, intermediate and predominantly rural

³ Youth was in this case defined as people aged from 0 to 30 years

⁴ According to Eurostat methodology all eight counties in Slovakia are classified as NUT3 regions

⁵ Even though there are several variations in the title such as LEADER I, LEADER II and LEADER +; the overall program is best known as the “LEADER” and therefore this name is employed in the thesis

developed. These are the reasons why Banská Bystrica county is an appropriate case that is worth researching not only for its regional implications, but also in terms of a considerable need to “learn relevant lessons of LEADER+ and “new LEADER” and commit funds to... mainstreaming innovative ways of involving and benefiting young people in local rural development action” (Shucksmith 2010, 30). Moreover, given the fact that the LEADER programme will enter new programming period at the end of the year 2013, suggestions for its policy improvements are highly relevant and very important for the further development of rural areas.

In this context, the main research question of the thesis is as follows:

“Why is it important for the LEADER programme to promote the involvement of youth in rural development and how it should be carried out in Banská Bystrica county?”

The thesis presents theoretical as well as empirical arguments in the following order. After outlining methodology, chapters one and two provide a review of the relevant literature which serves as a justification of the importance of youth involvement. Chapter three seeks to portray the theoretical perspective of the policies that involve youth in rural development and offers the general overview of the youth-related policies in Slovakia. In the last chapter, the issue is narrowed down to the LEADER programme, which is considered a way how to involve rural youth in rural development. The findings of the field research are presented in the case study of Banská Bystrica county. Furthermore, direct policy recommendations to what extent should LEADER-related authorities at different levels promote the youth involvement in rural development are presented at the end of this chapter.

METHODOLOGY

The research question will be answered on the basis of both theoretical and empirical knowledge gained through the review of literature, data analysis and own field research. The case study of Banská Bystrica county represents the empirical findings of the field research in which an online survey and personal interviews were used as research methods. The research sample includes all local and regional LEADER-related authorities established in Banská Bystrica county (LAG Zlatá cesta, LAG Partnerstvo Krtíšskeho Poiplia, LAG Malohont, LAG Podpoľanie, LAG Chopok Juh, Regional office of the National network for rural development- RO NNRD).

Rural youth involvement is examined in terms of active participation in the decision-making of the LAGs as well as in terms of youth involvement in LAGs' activities. The reason for selecting this two aspects of youth involvement is that they were identified in the EU White paper on Youth in 2001, where youth involvement was according to Moravčíková et al. (2010, 3) divided into "participation in representative democracy and participation in community life". Accordingly, the dependent variable, youth involvement, is operationalized in this thesis in two ways: 1.) as youth representation in LAG's decision making body, executive body, evaluation committee and management 2.) as youth active participation in the preparation and realization of the LAG's events, active usage of the facilities provided with the LEADER support and applications for LEADER funding.

The research itself was conducted as follows. Firstly, for an initial insight in the state of youth involvement, an online survey was undertaken. Actors related to the LEADER programme in the county (five LAGs and RO NNRD) were contacted and asked to fill in the questionnaire. In order to keep the compatibility with the EU studies, all questions were identical with those used in the official LEADER+ evaluation (EC/ DG AGRI 2010), while the questionnaire was prepared in Slovak language (Appendix 1). Afterwards, considering the gathered quantitative data

and the need to gain additional qualitative information, field research was conducted in the form of personal interviews with relevant representatives of selected LAGs and RO NNRD⁶. The field research was undertaken in the middle of May 2012.

The limitation of the research can be seen in its attachment to one particular county. As a result, even though the provided results are beneficial for gaining insight in the situation in Slovakia and for drawing attention on the researched issue, the generalization of the research findings at the national level must be done carefully and with regards to regional differences in the country.

In addition, it might be argued that instead of the LEADER-related authorities in the county, rural youth in the region should have been selected as a research sample. However, as a matter of fact, the main concern of the thesis, the extent to which LEADER programme should involve youth in their activities, is primarily dependent on LAGs themselves because of the bottom-up notion of LEADER policy design. Hence, the selected research sample is justified and appropriate for the purposes of the thesis.

⁶ Graphical location of the researched sites is illustrated at the Map no.1 in Appendix 2

CHAPTER 1: Specific characteristics of rural youth

“It is [...] tomorrow’s rural generations who most need to see rural areas as places where they can fulfill their aspirations. ”

IFAD ‘s Rural Poverty Report 2011 (cited in White 2010,20)

In order to understand the importance of addressing young people in rural areas, “rural youth” has to be conceptualized and their specificities acknowledged. This chapter begins with the examination of rural youth characteristics and continues with the justification of the importance of youth’s involvement for rural development. Even though the literature admits that this issue is multi-faceted and context-specific, it also suggests that if favorable conditions that help youth’s involvement are provided, rural youth can become substantial driver of innovations and local development.

1.1 Defining rural youth

“Youth” is usually defined as people in “the passage from a dependent childhood to independent adulthood” (CEC 2009, 6); however, the exact age delimitation of young people considerably varies across countries. For the purposes of this paper, the term youth is conceptualized in accord with the both EU Youth Report (CEC 2009), where the minimum age of 15 years was employed and the official LEADER evaluation study (EC/ DG AGRI 2010), where “youth” was understood as people below the age of 26. Hence, the focus of this paper is on the population aged between 15 to 26 years.

When talking about “rural”, definitions might vary as there are considerable differences in country-context and evaluation criteria. As Van Depoele and Ertugal (n.d.) argue, rural areas can

be defined as “areas with a large share of agricultural employment or as non-urban” (n.d., 4). In addition, they point out to the more technical definition of rural areas stated in the Agenda 2000, according to which rural areas are “local communities with less than 100 inhabitants per square kilometer” (n.d., 4). According to OECD, region is classified as predominantly urban, intermediate and predominantly rural considering its population density, the share of population living in rural communities and the presence of urban centers (OECD 2006, 26). The latter definition is employed in this paper.

Having explained the exact delimitation of “rural youth”, specificities of this target group can be further outlined. Yet, as Jentsch (2006) points out, “the employment of the category, rural youth, in research and policy debate is often linked with a conflated agenda that assumes that communities’ and youth’s interests are always compatible” (2006, 238). Hence in order to address this complex issue properly, it is important always keep in mind specificities of both dimensions, youth as well as rural dimension.

1.2 Attitude of youth towards rural areas

According to Wiborg (2004, 416), many theories claim that young people are detached from their origins. In contrast, her research shows that rural areas constitute “a repertoire of symbols that individuals use in different ways in creating their desired identity” (Wiborg 2004, 429). Interestingly, kinship, nature and rural lifestyle were identified in the research as features associated with the countryside. This finding implies that rural areas have rather positive connotation for young people and that attachment to rural home is more symbolic and emotional than material (2004, 429). In line with this statement, general appreciation of rural areas among young people was identified across European countries in the research project PaYPiRD⁷. The

⁷ Policies and Young People in Rural Development (EU Framework Project FAIR6 CT-98-4171), conducted in Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Portugal and UK between 1999 and 2002, coordinated by Mark Shucksmith (Jensch and Shucksmith 2004)

research has revealed that young people perceive the countryside as attractive and are concerned about the future of their home region (Auclair and Vanoni 2004, 97). The key positive characteristics of countryside identified by young people were “rural landscape, natural environment and climate; calm, peacefulness and security as well as existence of strong networks” (Auclair and Vanoni 2004, 81). Especially natural assets and close community relations are a considerable advantage recognized by people who migrate to cities, which they find “too built-up, polluted, less friendly and lacking a community spirit” (Stockdale 2004, 189).

However, there is also the other side of the coin, including for example “difficulties of access, remoteness, lack of activities, isolation, no public transport, aging population, social pressure” (Auclair and Vanoni 2004, 81). Interestingly, some of the attributes of rural areas such as job offer, housing conditions and free-time activities were perceived differently, depending on the particular local context. Additionally, as Stockdale (2004) argues, rural context implies limited personal freedom related to restricted widening of personal horizons because of the “interference or prying eyes of the close-knit rural community” (Stockdale 2004, 189).

To conclude, the attitude of youth towards rural areas is usually the mixture of positive and negative characteristics. Even though it is highly individualistic and it depends on local context, youth perceives their rural home with rather positive sentiments.

1.3 The process of transition

Young people independently on their living environment have to face the complex process of transition “from childhood to adulthood, from school to work, from dependency to independency” (Shucksmith 2004, 13). This transition is becoming longer all across the Europe and as Shucksmith points out (2004, 13), it may stretch even until the late 20s. Roberts (2003) agrees that youth-related theories used in the western sociology can be applied in broader context including transitional societies. However, as the research from Serbia (Tomanovic & Ignjatovic

2006) reveals, the individualization is more hindered than in Western Europe because of the structural and cultural constraints such as lack of resources, housing problem and paternalistic family traditions connected to limited autonomy of the youth (2006, 269). Strong family ties that are present not only in Southern but also in Central and Eastern Europe result in strong parent's support, making the gaining of complete independence even slower (Tomanovic & Ignjatovic. 2006, 271). Furthermore, Walker and Stephenson (2010) point out that young people all across the Europe experience very similar process of transition, yet it is much more extreme for youth from post-socialist countries as "emerging opportunities and new horizons seem to be inextricably connected to old dependencies and traditional modalities"(2010, 530). They also note that there are visible regional differences between countries that have joined the EU and the rest in terms of the availability of choices.

In the most tangible transition from education to employment young people generally experience several obstacles as they lack working experience and their knowledge does not fit the requirements of prospective employers (CEC 2009, 26). Consequently, youth represents a disadvantaged group on the labour market which is more exposed to unemployment. According to Jentsch (2006, 235), young people face the same transition problems independently of their location. However, it is argued that this process is even more difficult for young people in rural areas because of the gaps in "formal job search strategies or linking into local networks; transport solutions; training; childcare solutions; support networks" (EC 2008, 103). Moreover, territorial exclusion related to limited access to education and training, together with changing and seasonal nature of agricultural sector, form additional barriers for the effective transition of rural youth from school to work (EC 2008, 19).

As a result, the outlined limitations, together with the lack of adequately paid job opportunities and affordable housing, "force" rural youth to decide whether to stay unemployed or under-employed or leave the countryside (Stockdale 2004, 189, Walker and Stephenson 2010, 528). Research studies confirm that the tendency in Europe is outmigration to urban areas (EC 2008,

102). However, as a matter of fact, the high level of heterogeneity of rural young people has to be taken into account because, given various characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, social class, occupation, disability, social relations and others (EC 2008, 101, Panelli et al. 2002, 124), not all of them are similarly affected by the process of youth transition.

1.4 Social exclusion

Several studies (EC 2008, Shucksmith 2004) point out that rural youth is a socially excluded group of population. According to Shucksmith (2004), processes of ***social exclusion*** can be understood as “malfunctioning of the major societal system...that should guarantee social integration” (Shucksmith 2004, 22). The result of this process is a “dual society”, where some members of society do not have opportunity to participate in four societal systems: democratic and legal setting, labour market, welfare state and family and community (Shucksmith 2004, 12). Accordingly, social exclusion can be observed in four dimensions of integration: civic, economic, social and interpersonal (2004, 12) that are outlined below.

There is an evidence from rural Scotland (Shucksmith 2004, 22) that *civic integration* is influenced by remoteness of the rural areas resulting in a sense of powerlessness as well as by social stratification and inequality that can be spotted in more accessible countryside. While this kind of exclusion influences entire rural society, young people are in several aspects more disadvantaged members of community. As Jentsch (2006, 236) argues, even though young people want to participate in the community life and are capable of being responsible, appropriate opportunities and a guidance are usually lacking. Moreover, adults tend to consider them “ignorant, irresponsible, immature, incapable, a nuisance” (Dax et al. 2004, 179) what significantly inhibits the process of youth civic inclusion.

In terms of *economic integration*, inhabitants of rural areas are disadvantaged by the limited number of employment or housing opportunities, problems with transport and limited service

provision. The issue of economic integration is of particular importance as regards young people because their disadvantaged position on the labour market is connected to the transition from education to employment (EC 2008, 101, Shucksmith 2004, 23).

Social integration related to the social services of welfare state in rural areas is inhibited because of the problematic access to social benefits, limited provision of advice as well as “a specific culture of independence and self-reliance”(EC 2008, 20). Moreover, the lack of anonymity experience by claiming public benefit entitlement might result in a social stigma (EC 2008, 20). These factors negatively influence the ability to access the social entitlements. Hence, rural inhabitants may find themselves excluded from the distribution of resources or services because they fail to meet bureaucratic, legal and other requirements (Shucksmith 2004, 15).

All three dimensions of the social exclusion described above have a negative impact on the fourth dimension, the *interpersonal integration* caused by the “forced” outmigration of youth. Such exclusion of young people from their families and communities often results in the destruction of community life, the erosion of informal networks and the decline of rural culture (Shucksmith 2004, 23).

Despite the fact that the social exclusion of rural youth is more linked to the rural dimension because of the remoteness, limitations in infrastructure and restricted access to basic services specific for rural areas (EC 2008, 9), there are several disadvantages particularly related to youth dimension as young people are “unable to have access to many of the facilities and structures open to adults” (EC 2008, 101). This implies that rural youth is socially excluded in both dimensions and therefore should be addressed by policies as a distinct target group.

Yet, as Jentsch (2006) argues, “the greatest limitation of the case made for rural youth is that much of it has rested on a conflated agenda, which tried to deal at once with two separate issues, sustaining rural communities and promoting youth welfare” (2006, 236). She points out that the category of rural youth is not justified for political advocacy as it is in the case of gender or racial

social exclusion, because their characteristic are not fixed. Hence they are not subject of social prejudices as well as not being denied access to education or employment (Jentsch 2006, 232-234). Accordingly, needs of young people should be addressed by universal policies with the modification “based on, for example, gender, race, class, ability, age and, of course, geographical location” (Jentsch 2006, 235). Furthermore, Jentsch does not see the preferential treatment of rural youth as justified either, because there is no significant evidence that the basic needs of rural youths cannot be met (2006, 233). She proposes “youth mainstreaming” (2006, 238), a youth-sensible policy approach, as a feasible solution how to address needs but also potential and responsibilities of rural youth.

CHAPTER 2: The importance of rural youth inclusion

“The lost opportunity of actively involving youth is especially surprising, given the potential that young people’s ownership over community development would have for strengthening the sustainability of communities.”

Jentsch 2006, 237

Considering the positive attitude of youth towards their rural homes as well as their disadvantaged position caused by the process of transition and multifaceted social exclusion, attempts to involve them in rural life seem to be highly appropriate. Yet there are also other reasons justifying the importance of rural youth inclusion. The most substantial ones analyzed below are closely interrelated and are associated with integrated rural development, the quality of local democracy and the sustainability and productiveness of local communities. The end of this chapter is devoted to the current challenges and attitudes of rural youth in Slovakia that justify the need of their inclusion in rural development processes.

2.1 Integrated rural development

According to Dax et al. (2004, 157), the concept of rural development has often been equated with agriculture, mainly in the context of Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union. The shortcomings of this agrarian viewpoint were recognized in the influential document of European Commission from 1988 entitled “The future of rural society” (CEC 1988), where three fundamental considerations of rural development were outlined: economic and social cohesion, adjustment of farming and the protection of natural assets (1988, 5). This new approach shaped the further understanding of rural development, when not only economic, but also social and

environmental dimensions of rural development were considered and the better quality of life for rural citizens was emphasized (Jentsch 2006, 229). Rural policies were interlinked with regional policies and territorial measures in Structural Funds in order to provide integrated approach of rural development. Moreover, recognition of the importance of intangible aspects such as human and social capital rather than only physical capital appears to be a key step towards successful countryside (Dax et al. 2004, 157-158, Stockdale 2004, 187). Moreover, it is increasingly argued that while rural development policy “promote access, participation and cohesion, it must also be concerned with exclusion and empowerment” (Shucksmith 2004, 9).

In this context, it seems that only when the wellbeing of each rural inhabitant is considered and social exclusion in the society is restrained, can rural areas be developed in sustainable and integrated way. This forms departing point for the main concern of this paper. Involvement of young people in local development processes is crucial for integrated rural development and it cannot be fully achieved if they are excluded.

2.2 The quality of local democracy

One of the purposes of youth involvement is to increase their participation in public life which can be defined as “a process through which young people influence, share the control of resp. take the responsibility for particular decisions, plans and options that surround and affect them” (Moravčíková et al. 2010, 3). As Moravčíková et al. (2010, 3-4) further note, youth participation has several aspects: civic and political, ad-hoc and structural, direct or indirect. More importantly, there is a strong link between participation and the quality of democracy (2010, 4). The need of participatory approach is not recognized only in theory, but also in real life. For example, the EU Youth Strategy (CEC 2009) promoted the full participation of youth in civic and political life as one of its priorities, admitting that there is a significant space for improvement in terms of “the gap between youth and the institutions” (CEC 2009, 8).

Worth mentioning, the participation of young people may also enhance social capital of entire local community. According to Putnam (1995), social capital comprises “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (1995, 67). He argues that social capital is correlated with participation in community life and forms a vibrant civic society, which enhances the quality of democracy and makes it stable. Hence, in order to ensure high quality of democracy in the rural communities, youth should be involved in local communal and political processes to the maximum possible extent.

Opponents of youth involvement might argue that young people do not have enough experiences and skills to participate in local decision-making processes. Yet, as Panelli et al. point out, “young people can be competent and active members of society”(2002, 124). Moreover, Ramey and Rose-Krasnor argue that youth–adult collaboration can be very fruitful (2012, 88). In the light of the outlined arguments it seems that involving youth is very beneficial for the enhancement of local democracy as well as social capital and neglecting youth participation is a lost opportunity for community development (Jentsch 2006, 237).

2.3 Sustainable and productive rural communities

The importance of young people’s participation in rural development is often mentioned in relation to the depopulation of rural areas and related cultural and social decline of rural communities. As Stockdale argues, youth out-migration means to the loss of human and social capital that lead to long-term consequences such as an ageing population, decline in locally provided public services and dependency of communities on neighboring communities (2004, 187). Furthermore, exodus of ambitious and well-educated rural youth might seriously endanger development processes that are gradually more committed to endogenous action (Stockdale 2004, 187). In this context, the notion that local involvement of young people is important because it

provides them with incentives to stay in their home areas. However, incentives to stay should be provided together with incentives to return, because keeping young people in the countryside by itself does not guarantee the successful endogenous development of rural areas. As Stockdale further puts it, “only by moving away [do] individuals acquire the key ingredients needed to help the rural community” (2004, 189). Accordingly, the features of those who emigrate-independence, commitment to succeed and specific knowledge and skills are necessary for rural development and therefore the aim of relevant policies should be to create incentives and opportunities for young people who want to stay as well as to their rural homes.

Youth out-migration is closely related to the availability of working positions. Despite the fact that youth unemployment ratio does not show significant differences between rural and urban areas, it has a tendency to be more notable and harmful in the countryside (EC 2008, 16). It goes without saying that under-employment negatively affects overall economic activity and results in gradual decline of the local rural economy. As White puts it, “this is a serious problem, not only a tragic waste of potential in human terms but also a reflection of the sheer irrationality of the economic structures in which we live”(2010, 3). Besides the already mentioned barriers in rural employment such as the lack of decent and stable jobs or problems with transport, the “social immobility trap”(EC 2008, 25) restrain youth from enhancement of their own human capital. Furthermore, as young people possess considerable innovative and entrepreneurial potential and better insight into ever-changing technologies, they are able to initiate significant social developments if appropriate opportunities are available (Jentsch 2006, 231). As Stockdale notes, “undoubtedly without the energy and enthusiasm of young adults little may be achieved” (2004, 187).

Hence, providing youth with opportunities to participate in rural development appears to be an efficient strategy in terms of combating rural depopulation and sustaining rural communities as well as boosting local economy and making rural communities productive.

2.4 The Slovak context

In addition to the general purposes mentioned above, the context of a particular country also plays a significant role in the justification of youth involvement in rural development. A country perspective is necessary in order to understand the real challenges young people have to deal with and their attitudes towards rural development.

In Slovakia, as the Youth Report from 2010 (ME SR 2010a) has outlined, young people in rural areas lack informal educational activities in their home area originating in the absence of systematic support of rural youth organizations, as well as the poor cooperation of local governments with non-governmental sector in preparing youth events. Furthermore, student mobilities are insufficiently advertised and options for young people to enhance their talent are scarce. As the Youth Report further points out, the support of entrepreneurial activities is inadequate and rural youth in Slovakia has very limited access to information-communication technologies and e-government services. In terms of participation in community and political life, the needs and requirements of rural youth are not monitored and there is often no systematic approach at the level of local governments. Additionally, youth representatives are not involved in the local decision-making process, nor are they involved in the process of youth strategy design at national level (ME SR 2010a, 62-63). These challenges confirm the theory of social exclusion which is a valid reason for rural youth's involvement.

Furthermore, according to the results of a recently undertaken survey among approximately 600 young people from rural areas in Nitra county (Moravčíková et al. 2010), rural youth is interested in participation in their local communities. The biggest motivation of young people to join public life see 40% of respondents in "helping people and local community" and 30% in "improving the situation of children and families"(2010, 17). The biggest obstacle in participating is the lack of time for 61% and insufficient information for 39%; 29% of respondents indicated that they do not have the necessary contacts and 23% are not interested in cooperation with local

government (2010, 17). While the lack of time is the personal matter, the lack of information should be tackled by appropriate policy action. The significant proportion of the respondents, 81%, identified local sound broadcasting as the main source of information. Hence, this could be the best channel how to inform and potentially involve rural youth. Personal interaction with friends, neighbors or relatives is the main source for approximately half of surveyed young people. Moravčíková et al. (2010, 16) deem this to be a signal that membership of at least several young people in local decision-making processes might be helpful for distributing related information among broader youth.

Around 70% of respondents indicated they were members of free-time clubs, predominantly dealing with sport, folklore or youth activities (Moravčíková et al. 2010, 9-10). Yet the situation gets worse when it comes to participation in civic initiatives, local commissions or events organized by municipality. Additionally, only 8% of youth answered that they are a part of local problem-solving (2010, 13). Interestingly, the best way to involve youth in public life is according to 49% of respondents by cooperation at municipal events, followed by preparation and design of the municipal projects for 34% (2010, 18). This implies that young people in Slovakia want to be involved in active processes of local public life and problem-solving, however, they are obviously not provided with this opportunity and even if so, they are not sufficiently informed.

CHAPTER 3: Identifying policies for rural youth involvement

“All in all, a lot is done for the youth,

less is done by them.”

CEC 2006, 100

Considering the specificities of rural youth and the significant role that they may play in rural development, it is undeniable that their involvement in local processes is strongly justified and very important. This chapter seeks to review relevant theories that may identify the most appropriate policy approaches for the rural youth involvement. Existing policy practice in the context of Slovakia is elaborated as well.

3.1 Theoretical perspective

Jentsch (2006) suggests that youth participation in rural development should be promoted and supported by “mainstreaming their needs and rights” (2006, 237). This particular youth-led approach fully recognizes needs of young people, but at the same time stresses the responsibilities of youth to their home communities. Even though this approach also known as **“youth mainstreaming”** is mutually beneficial for individuals as well as their communities, Jentsch (2006, 238) notes that its potential for rural development has not been sufficiently recognized yet. The most significant employment of youth mainstreaming has been done by UNESCO, which has taken youth concerns into consideration in all programmes of the Organization since the beginning of the new millennium. More notably, youth issues were mainstreamed in two ways: firstly by responding to articulated and perceived needs of young people and secondly by initiating youth-empowering actions (UNESCO 2002, 3).

Accordingly, Jentsch (2006, 238) argues that youth issues should be mainstreamed to all policies and programmes, including rural development. She finds it an ideal way to increase the

scope of choice of young people, their participation in rural happening and thereby allow them to make “migrate-or-stay decisions to be based on viable alternatives” (Jentsch 2006, 236). Moreover, this approach is in her opinion based on the principle of social equity, because each member of rural community has similar amount of responsibility and ownership over the local development (2006, 238).

Yet, besides positive aspects, several obstacles might be present because of “the substantial shift in power relations”. In other words, adults should perceive youth as equally qualified in order to make youth mainstreaming an effective policy (Jentsch 2006, 237). The significance of **power relations between adults and youth** is also mentioned in other studies. Ramey (2011) argues that positive relations between adults and youth “including warm, trusting relationships and encouragement of youth’s talents and interests” (Ramey & Rose-Krasnor 2012, 89) are necessary for “positive youth development” and therefore should be considered and promoted by relevant policies. However, as Panelli and others (2002) observe, “ ‘community’ is not necessarily an imagined or idyllic notion but rather it denotes a social and spatial arena where youth interact with other people while experiencing a range of relations and negotiations” (2002, 123). Their research revealed that even though young people might have been marginalized, they were actively positioning themselves within their community, negotiating their own space and they make their “own fun” (2002, 125).

The positive relation between youth and adults can also be spotted in a “**partnership model**” that is becoming increasingly attractive policy instrument to combat social exclusion and enhance local economy (McGrath 2004, 131). McGrath points out that partnership arrangements represent potential for improving “participatory democracy” (2004, 131). However, he also stresses that there are several factors influencing the effectiveness of partnership such as “the history and extent of community activity in service provision; the degree of trust and co-operation between various stakeholders; the level of autonomy afforded to “partnership” and its capacity to influence policy-making” (McGrath 2004, 148). As regards young people, comparative research

undertaken in Ireland and Scotland shows that targeting youth through partnerships is highly context-specific and complex, yet its flexible character, “need-driven approach” and “the capacity to draw on a combined range of experiences” (McGrath 2004, 149) makes it a very promising policy instrument. Moreover, one of the observed advantages of researched partnerships was the ability to approximate the needs of youth incredibly closely, resembling youth’s “natural support systems” such as family or community (2004, 148-149).

To sum up, given the wide variety of theoretical approaches, complexity and context-specific character of youth involvement, it appears very difficult to come up with one model of effective policy. Yet, considering all outlined aspects, it seems that the involvement of youth should also be carried out with them and not only for them (UNESCO 2002, 3) as “most young people wish to participate as full and equal citizens in their community and beyond” (Jentsch 2006, 236).

3.2 Relevant policies in Slovakia

As a member of the EU, Slovakia is very much influenced by the policy priorities set at the EU level. As regards youth, the EU policy is currently shaped mainly by the “EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering” (CEC 2009) that has promoted cross-sectional approach and collaboration between various policy actors (CEC 2009, 2-4). Moreover, the “Open Method of Coordination” that encourage joined policy approach open for youth, was proposed as ideal method for implementation of priority policy fields such as education or employment. Youth mainstreaming is seen as appropriate method for other policies (CEC 2009, 3).

Youth policy in Slovakia is relatively well-developed and in line with EU policy priorities. The conceptual body for youth policy is the Cross-Sectoral Working Group that brings together representatives of ministries, regions, municipalities, youth and employers (Iuventa 2011, 7). This

setting shows that youth policy is the matter of many actors at different levels and in various fields. Yet it should be noted that actors relevant for rural development such as the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Transport, Construction and Regional Development or the National Network of Rural Development are not the part of this policy process.

The most important strategic document at national level, “Key Areas and Action Plans of the State Policy towards Children and Youth in the Slovak Republic for years 2008 – 2013” (ME SR 2008a) considerably affects two years Youth Policy Action Plans. Interestingly, comparing Action Plans that have been produced up to now, it can be noticed that rural youth was not mentioned in strategic document and neither in the Action plan for the period 2008-2009 (ME SR 2008b), yet it appeared in the Action Plan 2010-2011 (ME SR 2010b) as well as in the recent proposal of the Action Plan 2012-2013 (ME SR 2012) as an addition to the priority „Environment“. In the Action Plan 2010-2011 (ME SR 2010b), ten specific actions identified under this priority are oriented towards formal and non-formal educational activities connected to different sectors and various ministries, counties and municipalities are in charge of them. In the recent Proposal of the Action Plan for upcoming two years 2012-2013 (ME SR 2012), three actions under the priority field “Environment/rural youth” related to rural youth were identified: “1. To define the term rural youth, 2. To prepare analysis of the state of rural youth, 3. To develop conceptual document about the education of actors working with rural youth” (ME SR 2012, 6-7). All these tasks should be implemented at national level by the Ministry of Education and Juventa.

At the level of counties, youth-related policies are prepared in accord with the national youth policy. The biggest impetus for activating regional authorities was the EU Committee’s of the Regions “Opinion on a renewed European strategy” from February 2010 (Juventa 2010, 3-4). As a result, almost all Slovak counties developed their Action Plans putting into practice the cross-sectoral and collaborative approach (Juventa 2010, 42). Banská Bystrica county which is in the focus of this thesis developed Action Plan for the year 2011 in cooperation with county’s

departments of regional development, social policy, health, education and culture and transport, together with regional Centre for the free-time activities that contributed with its substantial expertise (Iuventa 2010, 4). Even though this strategy does not address rural youth explicitly, as Iuventa (2010, 42) expressed, there are many actions with clear design and innovative character, especially in terms of youth entrepreneurship, transport and environment.

At local level, the most notable action as regard youth-policy is the project “Partnership” that was launched in 2009 as the joined project of Iuventa and the Union of Slovak Municipalities. The aim of this project was to educate local public actors in the proper design of youth policy, inform them about financing possibilities as well as promote their cooperation with the youth organizations existent in their surrounding (Iuventa 2010, 3). Other youth-related policy implemented at local level that is worth mentioning is the project KomPrax (Competencies for praxis). This project is supported by the European Social Fund that is aimed at improving youth’s employability and key working skills (Iuventa 2011, 10). In addition, young people can gain direct financial support for activities connected to active citizenship or volunteering directly through the EU programme Youth in Action (ME SR 2010a, 40).

All youth-related actions at different levels mentioned above lead to a situation where youth issues are increasingly important in the policy agendas. Yet, when it comes to rural development institutions in Slovakia, they do not particularly deal with the youth issues nor are they involved in the design of youth policies at the national level. This is not surprising as youth is “rather new priority in EU rural policy” (Dax et al. 2004, 179) and hence youth component within rural development programmes all over the Europe is rather rare (Jentsch & Shucksmith 2004, 269). The Slovak Youth Report 2010 (ME SR 2010a) argues that strategies connected to rural development aim to activate human potential in transforming rural areas and therefore “the role of youth as a key actor and carrier of the development processes is gradually being

emphasized”(ME SR 2010a, 62). However, the basic strategic document “National strategic plan for the rural development for the period 2007-2013” (MA SR 2006) does not define youth as a specific target group. As regards regional policy, young people can directly participate at the level of municipality in the preparation of projects implemented through the “Programme of village renewal” and “Programme of economic and social development”(Moravčíková et al. 2010, 4), yet as was already indicated at the end of the second chapter, youth described their involvement in project design rather low even though they wish to be involved more (Moravčíková et al. 2010, 13,18). As a result, the rural development measures can support rural youth only indirectly through the support of e.g. rural employment or educational activities. It might be argued that rural youth is already sufficiently addressed by other general youth policies. However, as was already mentioned, the challenges of rural youth are still not tackled, they are not provided with adequate opportunities to participate in local development and they are insufficiently informed. Hence, rural development initiatives, particularly those promoting integrated rural development such as local action groups, might be an effective way how to deal with these problems.

To sum up, it is apparent that national youth policy in Slovakia recognizes the specificities of rural youth and attempts to address them using the cross-sectoral approach. Hence, Slovakia does not fall within the Shucksmith’s criticism that “most rural policy ignores young people, and most youth policies neglect the rural dimension” (Shucksmith 2010, 6). Although it might be only “on paper”, Slovak youth policy specifically target rural youth.

Yet, in reality, stated policy actions do not directly affect youth’s involvement in measures related to integrated rural development. This task appears to be too specific for the overarching youth policy goals and hence it seems to be rather a responsibility of rural development actors at the local level. More importantly, the question to what extent local initiatives involve youth remains unanswered. This is the reason why the LEADER programme and its implementation in Banská Bystrica county is examined in detail in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4: The LEADER programme - a way to involve rural youth?

“LEADER means listening to the voice of local citizens

and increasing their participation.”

Van Depoele & Ertugal. n.d, 19

When talking about youth involvement in rural development, several authors suggest the LEADER programme to be an ideal method because of its participatory nature (Dax et al. 2004, 180, Jentsch & Shucksmith 2004, Van Depoele & Ertugal. n.d). In reality, there is mixed evidence as regards young people's role in the LEADER programme. The purpose of this chapter is to provide the description of the LEADER programme that is the necessary for subsequent examination of the EU wide situation and outlined lessons from Banská Bystrica county. Moreover, policy implications are provided at the end of this chapter.

4.1 The design of the LEADER programme

The LEADER programme is aimed at improving standard of living in rural areas and promoting rural endogenous development carried out through Local Action Groups (LAGs), local partnerships composed of actors from public, private and civic sector. Importantly, the LEADER approach puts into practice the EU principle of subsidiarity as the decision-making process is in hands of local people (EP 2012, 19). The programme has been implemented in the EU already since 1991. Until 2006 it was implemented in three phases: LEADER I (1991-1993), LEADER II (1994-1999) and LEADER+ (2000-2006) as a complementary initiative to the mainstream EU rural policy (EP 2012, 18). Currently, LEADER programme represents Axis 4 in of the EU rural development policy for the period 2007-2013 and its main source of funding is the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EARDF) (CEC 2006, 19).

The LEADER programme has stakeholders at four levels (Podmaniczky 2008, 8-10). At the level of the European Union the main role is played by the Directorate General of Agriculture and Rural Development. At national level, every member state has a Managing Authority and a Paying Agency. The key constituents at local level are LAGs, that are in charge of design and implementation of integrated local strategy. At present, around 2200 LAGs are established in all 27 EU member states (EP 2011, 18). The fourth level of stakeholders according to Podmaniczky (2008, 11) is the project level where the stakeholders are project beneficiaries. As for the characteristics that make the LEADER programme distinctive from other rural development approaches, it has seven specific principles:

1. Bottom-up approach,
2. Area-based approach,
3. Local partnership,
4. Multi-sectoral integration,
5. Networking,
6. Innovation and
7. Inter-territorial and international cooperation (ENRD 2012).

In general, the LEADER programme has proved an efficient approach to local development which is helpful in promoting human, social as well as economic capital (CEC 2006, VI, EC 2008, 27-28). Yet, there are several deficiencies that make the management at the local level inefficient such as “excessive bureaucracy; difficult relationships between managing and other involved authorities on one side and LAGs and project promoters on the other; problems with raising co-funding; delays in financing; and insufficient autonomy of the LAG” (CEC 2006, III).

4.2 Involving youth through the LEADER programme

Some studies argue that LEADER programme addresses youth involvement sufficiently (ECORYS 2010, 28) and so far it has positively affected young people in terms of creating jobs and training possibilities (EC 2008, 28). However, the Synthesis of LEADER+ evaluations (CEC 2006) shows that even though the requirement to target priority beneficiaries is formally obeyed “on paper”, particular measures in reality are often missing and the continuous participation of youth in LAGs’ decision-making is rather rare as well (CEC 2006, IX). Many respondents representing LAGs expressed the feeling that the needs and specificities of young people are not reflected in LAG’s work (CEC 2006, X). This leads to the conclusion that except for some cases, “young people are not sufficiently addressed by LEADER” (CEC 2006, IX). However, on the other hand, respondents deem the topic of youth involvement important which forms positive ground for future developments in this regard (CEC 2006, IX). Moreover, many programmes take into account youth; actions to improve public leisure facilities or organize cultural event also frequently benefit local youth; and actually young people are sometimes advantaged in the selection of projects for funding with a certain amount of extra points (CEC 2006, 100).

The evaluation study of the LEADER+ programme (EC/ DG AGRI 2010) shows very similar findings to those mentioned above, yet on the contrary, according to replies of several representatives of Managing Authorities, it cannot be so clearly stated that young people are not sufficiently addressed by the LEADER+ programme (EC/ DG AGRI 2010, 110). As regards young people and their role in LAGs’ activities, almost half of LAGs reported that in approximately 10-25% of their activities young people were set as priority beneficiaries. This proportion may be considered relatively poor, but in fact, 78% of LAGs agreed that their activities attracted significant number of young people (EC/ DG AGRI 2010, 116). Accordingly, the general conclusion from LAG’s responses is that although generally young people are not priority beneficiaries of LAG’s activities, they are usually involved in LAG’s activities to considerable extent which is a positive signal. On the other hand, vast majority of LAGs (92%)

responded that less than 10% of the people involved in the LAG's decision-making process are below the age of 26.

Thus, it can be stated that the overall youth involvement in LAGs' decision-making and management across the researched countries is rather low and not sufficient (EC/ DG AGRI 2010, 117). Accordingly, as the synthetic study (CEC 2006, 101) argues, youth participation in the LAG's decision-making bodies such as a board or a project evaluation committee should be one of the criterion by LAG's selection and youth should be "positively discriminated" as a specific target group (EC/ DG AGRI 2010, 174). More radical suggestions propose to set quotas of young people in LAG's decision making bodies or specify quality standards of integrated local development strategies (EC/ DG AGRI 2010, 174). However, given the variety of LAG settings and their context-specificity, such criteria might be in some cases rather harmful and hence they definitely should not be binding.

Having described the extent to which youth is involved in rural development processes promoted by LEADER programme, it should be acknowledged that there are several structural obstacles that cannot be tackled by LAGs. Young people do not possess the capital that is needed in initial stages of project realization, they often do not have access to loans and are often not present in their home area because of the mobility to education or work (CEC 2006, 100). It is also argued that youth involvement in decision-making has proved problematic because of the lack of experiences (EC/ DG AGRI 2010, 117) and, building on the theoretical knowledge from chapter three, presumably also because of power relations between youth and adults. In addition, there is a notion that a special training for LAGs' representatives is needed in order to improve youth involvement (EC/ DG AGRI 2010, 110, 115). An example from Polish LAG, Wrzosowa Kraina showed that "attempts to involve young people were not so successful, apparently because the leaders of the partnership lacked the necessary skills" (EC/ DG AGRI 2010, 117).

4.3 The case study of Banská Bystrica county

In Slovakia, the LEADER Programme has been implemented since 2007 as the fourth axis of the National strategic plan for the rural development for the period 2007-2013 (MA SR 2006). However, the capacities for the implementation of LEADER axis were strengthened already before through the technical assistance under programme SAPARD as well as specific activities of the Ministry of Agriculture of the Slovak Republic. Currently, key stakeholders related to LEADER are the Ministry of Agriculture, the Agricultural Paying Agency (APA) as well as National Network of Rural Development (NNRD), a managing authority, that has regional office in every county (LEADER+ 2007, 3). At the local level, 29 LAGs were approved and were allocated financial support for their functioning that counts for 3% of entire budget of Slovak rural policy financed by ERDF. LAGs are entitled to implement their activities through Axis 3 where the activities should be related to the non-agricultural activities, rural tourism, education and information-sharing, renewal of municipalities as well as provision of services for rural inhabitants. Qualified beneficiaries of these measures are only NGOs and private businesses working in outlined fields; or certain municipalities that are fulfill several criteria (MA SR 2007).

Comparing this LEADER setting to neighboring countries Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, it is apparent that all of them have more LAGs, better funding opportunities and bigger flexibility in implementations of their measures resulting in more complex and integrated rural development. Besides the fact that all of them have more experiences with the LEADER programme, an additional reason for less favorable situation in Slovakia is too strict policy design imposed in the strategic document, which set unnecessary limitations and does not allow LAGs to be fully autonomous in the measures they would like to implement through the LEADER programme (OZ BB VIPA 2012).

As regards Banská Bystrica county, five local partnerships⁸ representing approximately 662 000 rural inhabitants and 516 municipalities, were awarded a status of LAG and hence are entitled to gain funding from the National programme of rural development. All LAGs are coordinated at regional level by the Regional Office of NNRD based in Banská Bystrica (OZ BB VIPA 2010). The next sections turn to the perspective of these LEADER-related institutions established in the county that is based on the findings of the field research. The preliminary online survey followed by personal interviews with managers of all five LAGs as well as regional coordinator for Banská Bystrica country are described below in the following thematic order: 1. Findings of the questionnaire, 2. Overall orientation towards youth and persistent limitations, 3. LAG's decision making and 4. LAG activities.

1.) Findings of the questionnaire

The findings of the preliminary online questionnaire provided a rough approximation of youth involvement in the researched LAGs. Four out of five LAGs responded that young people represent less than 10% of the local actors involved in the LAG's decision-making. The same result was expressed as regards the orientation of LAG's activities towards youth – four LAGs think that only 10% of their activities are specifically addressing youth. Only one LAG has identified these two aspects as being at the level of 10-25% that is higher compared to other LAGs, however, the personal interview has not confirmed better youth inclusion. As for the last question, two LAGs believe that many young people participate in their activities even though they are not specifically targeted on local youth. The other three provided own opinion pointing to the raising importance of the role of youth, certain activities done mostly for youth as well as limitations that restrain LAGs from addressing young people.

⁸Namely LAG Zlatá cesta, LAG Partnerstvo Krtíšskeho Poiplia, LAG Malohont, LAG Podpoľanie, LAG Chopok Juh

The questionnaire's findings are to the great extent similar to the findings of the ex-post LEADER+ evaluation study (EC/ DG AGRI 2010), where the level of youth involvement in LAG's decision making and the degree to which youth was addressed by specific activities were rather low, however, actual participation of young people in LAG's activities was considerably high. It has to be acknowledged that these general findings does not provide full picture because, as was revealed during personal interviews, the involvement of youth is very complex and context-specific issue and many local factors have to be considered on the case-by-case basis in order to undertake the proper evaluation. This notion was also expressed by the regional coordinator, underlining the importance of additional qualitative information gained by personal encounters with LAG's representatives.

2.) The orientation towards youth and persistent limitations

Overall, LEADER representatives in Banská Bystrica county deem youth involvement in local rural development important and agree that there is an interest of youth to be involved. As the regional coordinator pointed out, youth involvement is essential for the long-term sustainability of rural areas. Yet, regrettably, the general setting of the LEADER programme does not allow LAGs to support youth involvement more extensively. National LEADER guidelines are simply very strict in terms of project beneficiaries. Unless young person is a representative of municipality, a member of an NGO related to education or a businessman in the field of tourism or farming, LEADER funding is not accessible. This problem was mentioned by all respondents while few noted that, given the too narrow profile of supported activities and lack of capital, it is often impossible for youth to fulfill these criteria.

LEADER in Slovakia was designed as a pilot project and, according to several interviewees, it does not serve properly the realization of local strategies based on the need of local communities. The reason is that LAGs' maneuvering space is too limited by national guidelines. Hence, the bottom-up approach and the will of LAGs to address youth is rather suppressed. Moreover, the

process of LEADER's implementation is significantly limited by too strongly centralized administration of funds resulting in slow management of project applications, huge delays of reimbursement procedures and immense over-bureaucratization. Under these conditions, it is very difficult for LAGs to ensure higher involvement of one certain target group, especially when management is limited to three persons. Furthermore, not only managing capacities of LAGs but also possibilities to exchange experience with other LAGs or to gain youth-specific training is very limited. Despite the outlined obstacles there is a notion that activities of LAGs motivate young people to participate in public life. Interestingly, some LAGs even initiate their own actions aimed at youth involvement that not funded by LEADER. This implies strong commitment to work with youth and involve them in local development.

3.) LAG's decision making

Involvement of youth in local decision-making processes is considered important by respondents, yet the majority of them do not think that it should be a binding requirement set for instance in the form of quota. Three LAGs agreed that it would be helpful to identify young people as priority beneficiaries or a target groups, however, it was stressed that such a measure should have voluntary nature because every single LAG is context-specific and priorities should be defined from the bottom up.

Youth representation in LAG structures (decision making body, executive body, evaluation committee and management) appears to be in general rather low when using the age limit below 26 years, but relatively higher when expanding the limit to 30 years. On average, every LAG has approximately three members younger than 30 years, but only some of these young members are involved in decision making processes. It is important to note that managers of two LAGs and several other LAG employees are counted within youth category, which is a very positive sign not reflected in questionnaires. Interviewees reported that young people are interested, enthusiastic and willing to participate, but the key obstacle for joining LAG structures is their regular mobility

to education and work. Moreover, lack of information or experiences plays also an important role.

Leader authorities at national level attempted to promote youth involvement in LAG structures and in preparation of LAG's strategy by awarding additional points in the LAGs selection process. However, as regional coordinator pointed out, it is just a formal procedure because this criterion does not have significant value compared to other criteria and in fact merges the involvement of youth, women and young farmers together. This should be changed in order to give this criterion real meaning and potentially motivate LAGs to involve more young people in their decision-making structures.

4.) LAG activities

Because young people are not identified in National rural plan as priority beneficiaries, LAG's only tool to directly support young people is awarding them a certain amount of extra points by the selection of applications for funding. Three LAGs out of five reported that they use this opportunity. However, it was also noted that project applications submitted by young people are rather rare. Main explanation is the difficulty of youth to have a business in tourism and limited number of young farmers that want to ask for support of non-agricultural activities. Analyzing all responses, only one MAS reported young person that is active in farming.

As for the activities done for youth, several interviewees pointed out that local young people can benefit from municipal projects such as building of the playground. However, even these activities are defined very narrowly and so the LEADER funding is not available for innovative or creative projects not fitting the guidelines. Activities provided by NGOs are limited to education; sport, folklore, religious and other free-time clubs that have significant proportion of young members are, unless they design an educational activity, literally "out of the game". Cultural events or other specific activities such as photo competitions that are to considerable extent directed towards youth are frequently organized by LAGs.

LAGs reported that they use funding from Axis 4 that is directed towards their existence, promotional activities and cooperation also for involving local young people. This is the case for example by inviting young people to LAG's training sessions, teaching them how to write project proposals or in some cases even attending their field trips. In terms of informing and awareness rising, several LAGs cooperate with local schools and distribute informational materials during various youth events. One LAG has even reported that it tries to approach youth through the establishment of a facebook account. Young people are involved also in LAG propagation activities by representing local traditions or products. An interesting opportunity how to involve youth is also international cooperation among LAGs where young people can take part in exchange stays or other related activities.

Considering the limited LEADER support for activities involving youth, it seems that majority of LAGs are trying to do the maximum in order to address young people within limits set from above. Moreover, some LAGs even look for other ways how to target local youth and implement additional measures such as KomPrax, the programme improving youth employability. Worth mentioning is the best practice of LAG MALOHONT, which has set its own priority "activation of citizens" that is not supported by LEADER. This priority aims at supporting local informal groups of people or civic associations by funds collected from municipalities and local enterprises. In this way, small youth initiatives such as folklore groups or free-time clubs are also able to carry out a project benefiting whole local community. This method of rural development proved to be very popular and more accessible for young people than LEADER programme, because the requirements are less strict; administration is faster and more open to creative ideas from various fields; and most notably, the funding is available immediately with only 10% of co-payment while LEADER requires significantly higher amount of initial capital. This is the reason why this form of youth involvement in local development appears to be more effective than LEADER programme.

To sum up, the field research revealed several important aspects of youth involvement in LEADER in Banská Bystrica county. Most notably, there is a strong will from the LAG's side to cooperate with young people. However, current design of LEADER programme have not supportive but rather limiting effects on youth involvement and it negatively affects bottom-up principle and autonomy of LAGs. Despite the fact that the involvement of youth in decision-making processes is rather low, they are not restrained from participation and the main causes of their non-participation are to great extent structural and beyond the scope of LAGs. LAGs do not and in fact cannot address youth as specific target group, though young people are involved in a number of their activities.

Putting all these aspects together, the **lessons from Banská Bystrica county** are as follows:

- Youth involvement in rural development is a complex and context-specific issue. The design of LEADER might significantly differ across countries. Therefore it cannot be stated that the LEADER programme is always an ideal way to involve rural youth.
- A key policy implication for the upcoming programming period of LEADER in Slovakia is that LAGs should be provided with an opportunity to define youth as priority beneficiaries, ensuring the voluntary basis. This would enable more young people to be involved in the local development processes promoted by LAG. At the same time, it would strengthen the bottom-up approach and the autonomy of LAGs.
- Greater scope of LAGs actions that are qualified for LEADER funding would allow LAGs to use innovative and creative potential of local communities, particularly young people;
- the provision of capital in initial stages of project implementation, more flexible requirement on project applicant as well as the possibility of training in project writing are necessary in order to involve youth in LEADER project cycle;

- lowered bureaucracy, the possibility of youth-related training of LAG staff and issue-based knowledge-sharing should be ensured in order to improve the capacity of LAGs to address youth; and
- the sole quantitative evaluation of youth involvement in local development through LEADER's scale is not sufficient because it fails to reflect specificities of local context and the effect of national policies. This is argued also by Podmaniczky (2008), who found that qualitative data should also be used for LEADER evaluations.

CONCLUSION

In light of the underlying theoretical knowledge, youth involvement in rural development at local level is justified and important issue. The question how relevant policies should promote rural youth involvement does not have one unambiguous answer, however. In general it can be concluded that rural youth policies should be carried out with youth and not only for youth. Mainstreaming youth into policies and building on local partnerships is considered an effective approach too. Moreover, policy-makers should never forget that involving young people in fact means providing them with opportunities to participate.

The findings of the research examining the LEADER programme in Banská Bystrica county reveal that the context of a particular country, the real needs of local communities and specific skills of LAG's representatives are key preconditions of success. Hence, as every LAG is unique, it would not be wise to impose uniform requirements related to youth involvement from the central level of the EU or the national authority. Moreover, considering the bottom-up and area-based features of the LEADER programme, local decision-making should be fully in the competence of LAGs and hence "enforced thematic prescriptions as this is considered weakening the area-based approach" (CEC 2006, X).

To put it simply, LAGs should promote the involvement of youth in local development to maximal possible extent, yet "a well implemented LEADER approach spares further prescriptions" (CEC 2006, X) and so the measures aimed at rural youth should be encouraged but not imposed.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: LAG Questionnaire

Name of the LAG, Name of the respondent, Position in LAG

1. What is the approximate proportion of youth (below the age of 26) actively involved in LAG decision making?
 - Less than 10%
 - Between 10% and 25%
 - More than 25%
 - I don't know
2. What is the approximate proportion of LAG activities oriented specifically on young people in your region?
 - Less than 10%
 - Between 10% and 25%
 - Between 26% and 50%
 - More than 50%
 - I don't know
3. How successful were those activities that were specifically targeted at young people?
 - They were popular in terms of the numbers who got involved
 - were successful in the sense that they help younger people to get more involved in local development
 - There were not so many activities specifically targeting young people but there were many young people who took part in LAG activities
 - It was hard to maintain interest
 - Other response - please specify

RO NNRD BANSKÁ BYSTRICA Questionnaire

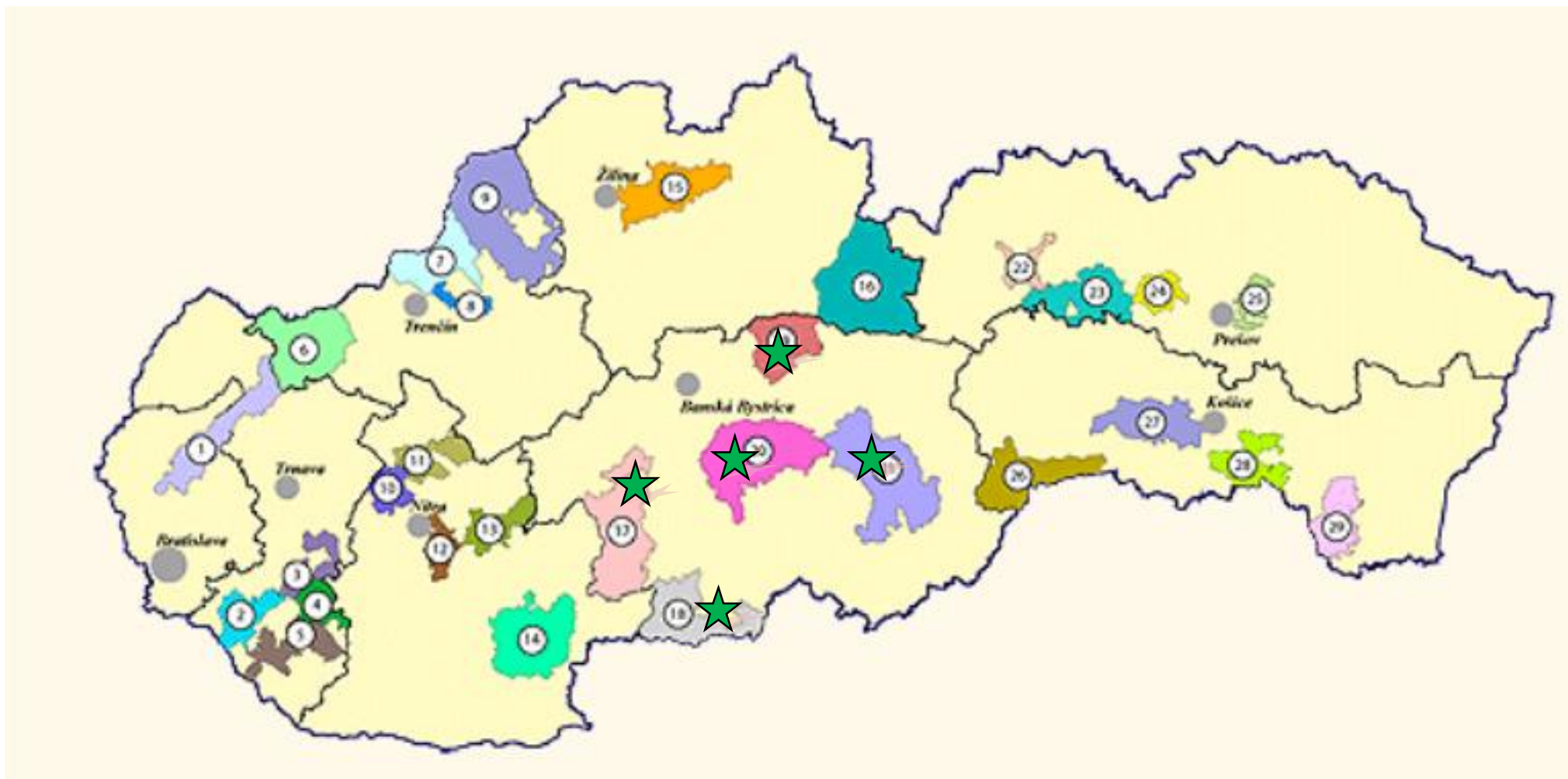
1. Assess the following statement on the scale 1-5, where 1 represents "strongly disagree", 2 "disagree", 3 "no opinion", 4 "agree" and 5 "strongly agree":

There is evidence that LEADER projects have addressed the needs and potentials of young people.

- Please explain your choice:

Note: Consider potential indicators such as number of actions explicitly addressing young people; number of actions with a higher (>50%) uptake of young people etc.

APPENDIX 2



Map no.1: Local action groups located in in Banská Bystrica county. Source: <http://www.nsr.sk>

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