

Assessing Sustainability Outcomes in LEADER Projects: Evidence from the Szigetköz–Mosoni-Plain Local Action Group, 2014–2020 programming period

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Abstract

Purpose—This study examines how sustainability objectives are realised in rural micro-regional development through the LEADER programme, focusing on the extent to which funded local projects integrate the environmental, social, and economic dimensions of sustainability.

Design/methodology/approach—The research investigates the activities of the Szigetköz–Mosoni Plain LEADER Association, located in northwestern Hungary, during the 2014–2020 programming period. All project applications submitted to the Local Action Group (LAG) were analysed using the association's internal database, supplemented by semi-structured interviews with experts responsible for programme coordination. Applications were categorised and evaluated according to how well they connected with and simultaneously supported society, the economy, and the environment, in line with the principles of sustainability.

Findings—The results show that projects focused on improving social well-being, such as better quality of life, keeping more people in the region, and supporting local communities, were the most common across all five funding themes (called 'measure packages') of the local LEADER strategy. Projects with economic goals or combined social-economic goals came second. Projects that directly targeted environmental protection were much less common, even though the region has valuable natural areas and landscapes worth protecting. This points to an imbalance among the three pillars of sustainability (social, economic, and environmental) and suggests that future rural development programmes should place greater emphasis on the environment.

Originality—Through the empirical evaluation of implemented projects, the study contributes to the field by operationalising the LEADER programme's intervention logic. Systematically evaluating sustainability outcomes at the project level provides novel insights into how the sustainability approach has evolved within the LEADER-funded rural development framework during the 2014–2020 period.

Keywords: LEADER, Local Action Group (LAG), rural area, development, sustainability

Paper type: Research Article

1. Introduction

Implementing and enforcing sustainability is now a requirement at both national and local levels. As a consequence, the aim of rural policy has shifted to ensuring the well-being of people, the economy, and nature more broadly. According to a publication by Goda et al. (2022), rural development policy is now a declared part of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which is the EU-wide framework that governs agriculture and rural development across all member states, including

Hungary. The CAP focuses on addressing local problems and strengthening local economies to create prosperity, generate new jobs, preserve the natural and cultural values of the countryside, and support environmental protection (Finta and Horeczki, 2023). The scope of the European Union's rural development policy has broadened considerably, but the emphasis remains primarily on agriculture and sustainable food production, with the goal of innovating rural spaces (Šūmane et al., 2018). The bridge between the management of rural areas and efforts to support those areas is embodied in community-level development policy (Figure 1).

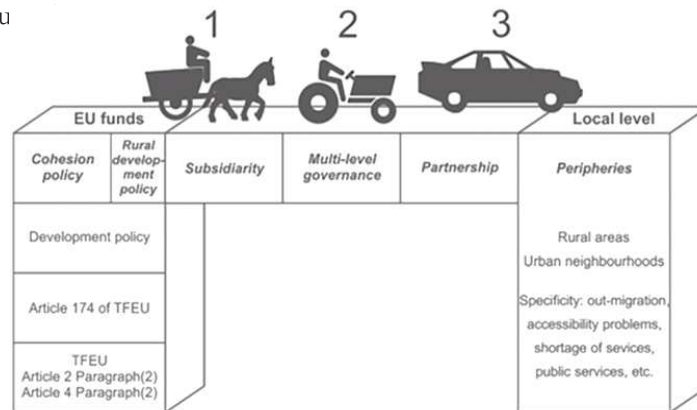


Figure 1: Bridge to Development Policy at the Community Level

Source: Finta (2022).

While this bridge provides a useful starting point, rural areas and the challenges they face demand a more complex approach and way of thinking. Anyone seeking to improve rural conditions must recognise that the countryside and its settlements are constantly changing, and the activities taking place there are continually diversifying. Agricultural work is no longer the fundamental determinant of rural life in Hungary either (Dancsókné Fóris, 2020). The gradual depopulation of certain rural areas is a substantial and negative trend. Fekete (2015) explains that the emigration of young people, the decline in village populations, and the ageing of society remain characteristic trends. Improving the population retention capacity of rural areas is therefore a priority. Two opposing forces make this difficult to achieve. On the one hand, rural settlements offer an 'idyllic village lifestyle' that is sustainable, peaceful, and in harmony with nature (Henkel, 2012). On the other hand, villages face the fundamental need to offer a wider range of services and improve their quality, while village residents increasingly demand that their settlements become more urbanised (Szlávik, 2019). These forces are typical, to varying degrees, of rural areas in East-Central Europe (Furmankiewicz et al., 2010; Veselicz et al., 2025).

The tension between these forces has also set villages on a new development path, and new development directions and strategies can serve as breakthrough points for villages, resulting from these changed roles and expectations (Bérczi et al., 2022; Konečný, 2019). One of the tools for implementing these development directions and strategies is the so-called LEADER programme (or LEADER approach), which supports community initiatives (Ray, 2000; Szörényiné Kukorelli, 2020) and provides the conditions essential for the development of peripheral regions (Finta and Horeczki, 2023).

LEADER is a French acronym derived from *Liaison entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale*, meaning 'Links Between Actions for the Development of the Rural Economy.' It is a rural development tool (or, more accurately, an approach) that has undergone several phases. Its specificity lies in its promotion of grassroots initiatives, the self-organising capacity of local communities, and cooperation among different groups in society (Bártfai, 2023). This is because the local level represents a value and, in terms of its role, can become an increasingly value-bearing level in the future (Szlávik, 2019).

The LEADER 'generations' (in the European Union) are as follows (Nemes and Magócs, 2020):

- LEADER I (1991–1994): introduced as an experiment to disseminate a new type of rural development approach.
- LEADER II (1995–1999): built on the success of the previous programme and sought to promote it. It focused mainly on disadvantaged rural areas.
- LEADER+ (2000–2006): extended the programme to a wider range of rural areas.
- LEADER (2007–2013): included in the rural development programmes as the fourth axis of support. It had a much larger budget than the previous phases.

- LEADER (2014–2020): required to be integrated into the rural development programme; the concept of Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) was introduced, and several Structural Funds were involved.

The LEADER programme was introduced in Hungary in 2001 (Patkós, 2016.) While its ‘generations’ largely follow the EU timeline, the programme was adapted to local conditions and priorities, progressing through four distinct phases during the pilot period:

- LEADER (2001–2004): a pilot phase designed to gain experience before Hungary’s EU accession.
- AVOP LEADER+ (2004–2006): implemented under the Agricultural and Rural Development Operational Programme (hence also called AVOP LEADER+), aimed at expanding opportunities for income generation and employment.
- ÚMVP LEADER (2007–2013): implemented under the New Hungary Rural Development Programme (adopted in 2007), aimed at creating community spaces and supporting village renewal.
- VP LEADER (2014–2020): implemented under the Rural Development Programme, aimed at linking development as closely as possible to local needs.

Funding for LEADER implementation is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Support for the Implementation of LEADER in Hungary

	LEADER	AVOP LEADER+	ÚMVP LEADER	VP LEADER
Time	2001-2004	2004-2006	2007-2013	2014-2020
Number of LAG	14	68	96	103
Budget	25 million HUF	HUF 6.7 billion	HUF 70 billion	HUF 74 billion

Source: the authors, based on the official KAP site (Közös Agrárpolitika, n.d.)

There are seven defining characteristics of the LEADER approach (Figure 2), which should be reflected in local development.

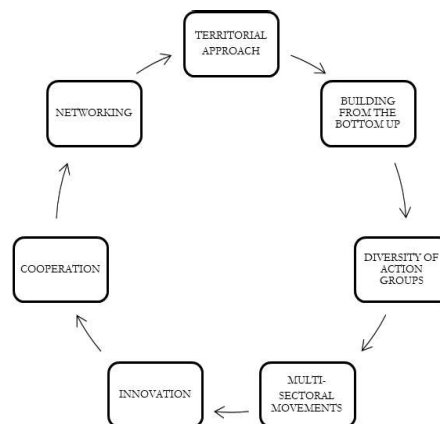


Figure 2: The seven Pillars of the LEADER Programme

Source: the authors, based on Johansson and Holmquist (2024)

The distinctive strength of the LEADER approach in the period under review lies in its delivery by local and regional actors, namely municipalities, entrepreneurs, and NGOs, through Local Action Groups (LAGs). During implementation, the LAG draws up a rural development strategy tailored to the area’s natural and socio-economic characteristics; this strategy is then implemented by a working group (the local LEADER association). The working group selects and supports local development projects through local calls for proposals, within the limits of the allocated budget (Gazdakör Leader, n.d.).

According to the European Court of Auditors, LEADER and community-led local development have both notable strengths and significant weaknesses.

The two main strengths are as follows:

- Local Action Groups (LAGs) help local organisations play a role in territorial development, and
- The majority of Member States examined have good procedures for selecting Local Action Groups.

The principal weaknesses are:

- The approval process is slow,
- It is difficult to demonstrate that the supported proposals actually provide added value, and
- The multi-fund approach makes it difficult to support regional development projects (European Court of Auditors, 2022).

According to the European Network for Rural Development database, at the end of 2022, there were 3,134 LAGs across the EU, of which 103 were in Hungary, 77 in Austria, and 110 in Slovakia. In Hungary, the largest number of LAGs (17) is in the North Hungary region, while the smallest (5) is in the Central Hungary region (European Network for Rural Development, 2016 n.d.). (https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/networking/leader/lag-directory_en)

Veselicz et al. (2025) note that, since the launch of the LEADER programme, several international analyses have examined the LEADER approach from different perspectives (Dax et al., 2016; Furmankiewicz et al., 2010; Volk and Bojnec, 2014). There are also examples of critical characterisations of Local Action Groups (LAGs), which are among the main implementing bodies of LEADER (Cejudo et al., 2022; Ray, 2000).

Patkós (2016), in his examination of the LEADER approach, found that Hungarian Local Action Groups (LAGs) tend to be very large, which runs counter to the LEADER spirit. His research also showed considerable variation in both the size and composition of these groups, and he argued that more professionals should be employed to address the size of their working structures.

Nemes and Magócs (2020) examined the strategies, local calls, and functioning of LAGs in 2020. Their key finding is that the distinctive contributions of the LEADER programme, beyond those of conventional funding programmes, were notably lower in the 2014–2020 period than in the previous programming period. This decline occurred because the application process became significantly longer and available resources were reduced, leaving far less time and capacity for essential LEADER activities, such as generating bottom-up project ideas and fostering local networking. As a result, the LEADER approach lost much of its relevance as a tool for genuine local-level development.

An important factor in the functioning of Local Action Groups (LAGs) is the size, composition, and experience of their working staff. At the 2015 Regional Studies Association conference in Piacenza, experts from several European countries observed that many LEADER managers treat their positions as temporary stepping stones and quickly move on to more established roles in regional or national spatial development agencies (Fekete 2015). On average, these working organisations consist of only 3–4 people, with only a few exceptions for larger management teams. One striking example is the Bük-MAK Local Rural Development Community, which is notably large by international standards.

The size and composition of LAG membership itself are additional key characteristics. Groups based in large lowland settlements tend to have very few members, whereas those in mountainous and hilly areas often integrate a much larger number.

In an average Hungarian Local Action Group, the three main sectors, namely public authorities (municipalities), the private sector (businesses/entrepreneurs), and civil society (NGOs and associations), are roughly equally represented, though businesses are slightly underrepresented. At the same time, the total number of members varies widely, with almost a ninefold difference between the smallest and largest LAGs (Patkós, 2016).

The Federation of LEADER Associations was established in Hungary to support the work of existing Local Action Groups (LAGs) and promote greater collaboration among them. For the 2014–2020 programming period, these LAGs identified strengthening rural–urban cooperation and the co-development of rural areas as key priorities (Finta, 2022).

The scale of activity during this period was substantial: the 103 LAGs published a total of 688 local calls for proposals by the end of 2020, a figure that rose to 715 by 7 June 2021. By that date, 8,891 applications had received support, totalling HUF 36.02 billion (European Network for Rural Development, 2022).

Several structural changes, however, created significant difficulties for the LAGs. Compared with previous periods, they were no longer permitted to cross county borders, a restriction that led many groups to dissolve or restructure to comply (Patkós, 2014). Another widely noted weakness was the post-project financing model: beneficiaries receive grants only after project implementation, which places a considerable burden on applicants during the early stages of an undertaking (as reported by the head of the Szigetköz–Mosoni-Plain LEADER Association).

Against this background, the present study analysed the projects implemented or initiated during the 2014–2020 period under the coordination of the Szigetköz–Mosoni-Plain LEADER Association, a Local Action Group operating in western Hungary. The analysis employed a ranking scoring system to evaluate the extent to which proposals within each package of measures integrated the environmental, social, and economic dimensions of sustainability.

2. Material and Method

2.1. The Szigetköz-Mosoni-Plain LEADER Association (Hungarian acronym: SZMSLE)

The implementation of the LEADER programme in the area under study is carried out by the Szigetköz–Mosoni-Plain Association. In this study, the main information and data on the applicants were analysed using the association's database of applications received during the period under review.

The Association's activities cover three adjacent geographical areas of Győr-Moson-Sopron County: the Szigetköz, the Mosoni Plain, and the Hanság (Figure 3). The Szigetköz is the only land delta in Europe formed by the Danube, located in the Little Hungarian Plain. Its fauna has adapted to the region's natural and geographical conditions, giving rise to a unique biodiversity (Szabó, 2006). The Mosoni Plain is also part of the Kisalföld landscape, characterised by low-lying, fertile soils. It stretches from Mosonmagyaróvár in a north-westerly direction to the Hungarian–Austrian and Hungarian–Slovak borders. It has an outstanding population of great bustards. The Hanság was once Hungary's largest wetland, forming a system connected to Lake Fertő. The Danube, Rába, and Répce rivers played the main role in its formation. After its drainage, the area has been subject to intensive agricultural activity under the supervision of the National Park to protect the native flora and fauna (Németh, 2014).

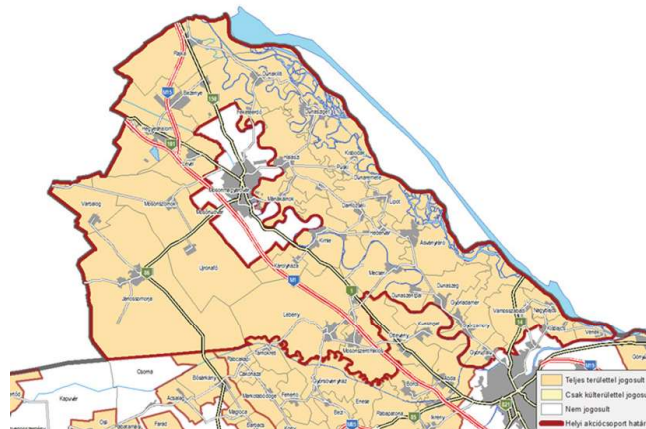


Figure 3: Area Covered by the Szigetköz-Mosoni-Plain LEADER Association

Source: Szigetköz-Mosoni Plain Leader Association (SZMSLE). Local Development Strategy 2014–2020

The Local Action Group covers 963.33 km² and encompasses 35 settlements. The population was 61,233 inhabitants in 2019. (Szigetköz-Mosoni Plain Leader Association (SZMSLE). Local Development Strategy 2014–2020) The region is an economically developed, dynamically growing part of the country, mainly due to its transport infrastructure and its geographical location. These factors have contributed to the development of industrial parks in the region, which are the largest employers. Austria's capacity to absorb labour is also a characteristic feature. The association compared the number of enterprises operating in its area with the number of registered enterprises per 1,000 inhabitants in three other LEADER associations in the county (RVE–Rábaköz Rural Development Association, AFLE–Alpokalja-Fertőtáj Rural Development Association, PKLE–Pannónia Kincse LEADER Association). It was found that the Szigetköz–Mosoni-Plain LEADER Association has the fewest enterprises. The tourism sector (based on thermal water, rowing, water sports, and fishing) and related services play an important role in the region's economy. The region's agriculture remains significant thanks to its fertile soils, agricultural traditions, and an increasing focus on local products. Despite the overall decline in the agricultural sector, local products such as honey, jam, cheese, butchery products, and processed vegetables and fruits are increasingly coming to the fore in the community.

The Local Action Group has developed a development strategy based on the social, economic, and environmental characteristics of the area (such as the unity of the area, common social characteristics, colourful cultural heritage and natural values, cooperating NGOs, cohesive settlements, the available entrepreneurial base, and school cooperation to ensure the acquisition of skills) as well as its interests and development needs.

The Local Action Group under review set the following main objectives for the 2014–2020 period: the preservation of natural assets, the improvement of the population's quality of life, the enhancement of the region's population retention

capacity, the development of local businesses, the support of NGOs and municipalities, and the promotion of local products in the market (Szigetköz-Mosoni Plain Leader Association (SZMSLE). Local Development Strategy 2014-2020). To achieve these objectives, the local strategy consisted of two overarching objectives and additional sub-objectives (Figure 4).

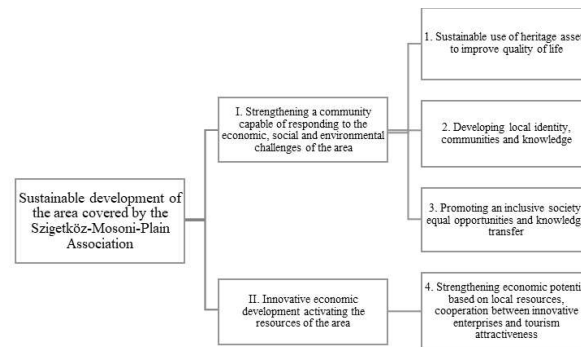


Figure 4: The Target Tree of the Local Action Group Under Review
Source: Strategy covered by the Szigetköz-Mosoni-Plain LEADER Association

Six thematic measure packages were developed to achieve the main objective and sub-objectives, but one had to be withdrawn due to resource constraints. Consequently, the following five were put out to tender:

1. Support for initiatives to preserve our natural, cultural, historical, and built heritage, to improve accessibility, and to enhance identity (VP6-19.2.1-81-1-17)
2. Development of local civil society organisations (VP6-19.2.1-81-2-17)
3. Programmes and community initiatives for the development of rural intellectual and community life and the transfer of knowledge (VP6-19.2.1-81-3-17)
4. Development of local entrepreneurs and quality product supply initiative (VP6-19.2.1-81-5-17)
5. Development of tourism services and cooperation (VP6-19.2.1-81-6-17)

2.2. Method

The LEADER programme, which forms part of the Common Agricultural Policy, is designed to ensure the sustainable development of rural areas through innovative, integrated strategies that enrich natural and cultural assets, strengthen the local economy, and improve community self-organisation and cooperation (LEADER Newspaper, 2004).

This approach is based on the assumption that LEADER projects can shape the three pillars of sustainability (environment, society, and economy—Figure 5) in the following ways:

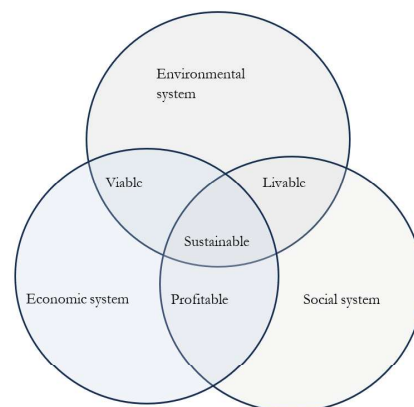


Figure 5: The Three Pillars of Sustainability
Source: the authors, based on Horváth (2018)

- For areas where the status and relative proportions of the three pillars are optimal, the overall net impact of any improvements needed to maintain the level of the three dimensions is zero (Tran et al., 2023), and generally these improvements are not implemented within the LEADER programme.
- A more pronounced impact is made in one or more pillars to establish and ensure optimal conditions.

Based on how developments are grouped to promote a sustainable area, six main categories are distinguished.

Those:

- Focusing on the environment,
- Focusing on social well-being,
- Strengthening economic competitiveness,
- Combining environmental and social aspects, and
- Combining environmental protection and economic interests.

These investments have been grouped under ‘compensatory action’.

The main research question considered how efforts to implement the principles of sustainability were actually realised in the region. Therefore, we reviewed all the applications received and, for each package of measures, presented the amounts paid and the purposes for which they were used. We then provided a ranking of the implemented proposals, showing how they contributed to different areas of development. We examined how the proposals implemented within the five measure packages evolved along the sustainability pillars. The analysis was based primarily on the sustainability approach. The LEADER programme aims to bring rural areas closer together so that the area in question can continue to function with a positive return, but this may not always be synonymous with sustainability. The implemented projects were ranked according to their composition and implementation on a scale of 1 to 7, corresponding to the seven cases described (levelling measure + six compensatory actions), where 1 represents the least involvement and 7 the most intensive contribution to the sustainability score. The ranking of projects was evaluated together with the coordinating experts involved in the research. By summing the ranking values, it becomes clear which area has been developed and by what contribution.

3. Analysis

3.1. Package of measures 1: Support for initiatives to preserve, improve accessibility, and raise awareness of our natural, cultural, historical, and built heritage

A brief overview of the region’s assets, along with the situation assessment conducted before preparing the Association’s strategy, shows that the area covered by the Association is rich in natural, cultural, and historical heritage. The Association considers it very important to preserve, restore, and transmit this heritage to strengthen identity and thereby maintain the attractiveness of the municipalities. The resources available under this call for proposals were intended to protect, preserve, maintain, and promote local heritage and heritage assets, thereby improving the local area’s image and increasing the population retention capacity of the settlements. The funds allocated under this measure were open to applications from municipalities, non-governmental organisations, and ecclesiastical legal entities within the LAG area under consideration.

The grants awarded were mainly used for the following purposes:

- Installation and renewal of street and house number sign systems,
- Renovation and modernisation of existing buildings (e.g., fire stations, memorials),
- Landscaping, creation of nature trails, and creation of outdoor community spaces,
- Purchase of equipment for the maintenance of community spaces (e.g., lawnmowers, tractors),
- Purchase of equipment for public safety (e.g., CCTV systems),
- Construction of playgrounds and outdoor sports facilities,
- Production of marketing publications, and
- Renovation of church bells.

A total of 69 applications were supported under this package of measures, amounting to HUF 154,766,558. Of these,

49 were submitted by municipalities and 20 by NGOs. The maximum eligible amount per application was HUF 5,000,000. Most payments ranged from HUF 4 million to HUF 5 million, with funds mainly used for construction work and camera installations. Because some municipalities submitted multiple applications, their total final payments are correspondingly higher. The municipality of Dunaszeg received the largest overall amount, with four successful applications: renovation of the churchyard and educational trail, construction of a promenade, renovation of a playground, and installation of a camera system.

3.2. Package of measures 2: Development of local civil society organisations

The Association's pre-strategy mapping exercise found that the number of NGOs in the SZMSLE area was below both the national and county averages. Strengthening local NGOs and emphasising their role is therefore crucial to building stronger communities and improving the quality of community life, which in turn can make rural areas more attractive and help stem the outward migration of young people. Funds available under this package of measures could be used to set up or develop a website, purchase equipment, machinery, uniforms, publications, and marketing materials related to the organisation's work. In addition to the general criteria, applications had to promote networking, meaning the applicant had to commit to cooperation (e.g. involving an organisation from a different municipality, or making the grant-funded equipment or materials available free of charge to three or more organisations). Another key requirement was the active involvement of young people in the supported development activities.

The supported applications were selected from among those undertaking the following activities: purchase of sports equipment for football and handball, fire-fighting clothing, pruning shears, hedge trimmers, dart machines, lawnmower tractors and accessories, purchase of changing rooms and pumps, renovation of a bird-watching tower, purchase of a winterised yurt, and production of a map of the Szigetköz. Two NGOs applied for support to increase cohesion within the equestrian community and to promote volunteering.

A total of 29 applications were supported under this package of measures, for a total amount of HUF 30,685,028. Only NGOs were eligible to apply. The maximum eligible amount was set at HUF 2,000,000 per application. Most applications were paid out between HUF 1 million and HUF 2 million. Several NGOs from the same municipality were awarded grants, so Rajka received the largest total final payment under this package of measures. The Rajka Equestrian Association purchased riding equipment, while the Rajka Fishing Association purchased a pruner, a scythe, a saw, a hedge trimmer, and a generator. The second-largest grant was awarded to Győrzámoly, where Győrzámoly SE spent the money on changing rooms and marketing equipment, and the K4 Water Sports Association of Győrzámoly on water sports equipment.

3.3. Package of measures 3: Programmes and community initiatives for the development of intellectual and community life in rural areas and the transfer of knowledge

The call's title makes it evident that this package of measures seeks to establish and support local programmes and an ongoing series of events. In doing so, it strengthens rural communities and local identity, nurtures traditions, and spreads awareness of environmental and health-conscious living. Such programmes help residents connect, exchange ideas, and draw inspiration from each other's successful practices.

Benefitting programmes' resources could be used to organise and run events, initiatives, thematic camps, awareness-raising lectures, initiatives to promote environmental and health awareness, professional competitions, quizzes, study trips, workshops, project days, the purchase of equipment and machinery, marketing activities, rent, accommodation, and so on. All these endeavours are linked to the preservation of traditions.

The supported projects also had to meet other specific criteria, such as: events had to include the presentation of local products and values, or provide traditional activities for children, or involve an organisation from a municipality other than the applicant's home municipality.

Ten events and programmes were implemented under this package of measures, with a total of HUF 4,033,862 in grants. The maximum eligible amount was set at HUF 500,000 per application. The beneficiaries were divided roughly 50/50 between municipalities and NGOs, with only a minimal difference in the final payment amounts in favour of the municipalities.

In the municipalities of Kimle and Kisbajcs, both the municipality and one NGO each received funded applications, while in the other municipalities, there was only one funded programme per settlement. Thematic camps were organised, focusing on the values of the Szigetköz and the arts. The Friends of Kisbajcs organised an old-time pig-slaughtering programme, and the Friends of the Leaf Association organised a folk song day. To maintain and increase health awareness, the Foundation for Mosonudvar organised an event for healthy children. The Dragon Boat Festival of the Kimlei Dragons Water Sports Association and the Fishing Tournament organised by the Municipality of Vének were the main events, both aimed at raising awareness among young people about local values and customs.

3.4. Package of measures 4: Developing local producers and entrepreneurs

The shortage of skilled workers in the region, Austria's draining effect on the labour force, and the decline in the number of businesses have made supporting entrepreneurship particularly necessary. This package of measures aims to improve the competitiveness of natural persons and micro-enterprises in the area covered by the Association, increase their capacity to maintain and create jobs, develop local products and services, expand their product range, and help them access the market by improving cooperation between economic operators. The aid was open to municipalities, private individuals, farmers, and micro-enterprises.

The supported activities are:

- Starting a business,
- Start-up of a business,
- Construction, investment, and energy development related to business development,
- Marketing and promotion of local products,
- Purchase of equipment, machinery, and software for enterprise development,
- Creation of a website related to the enterprise, and
- Training for business development.

In addition to the basic objectives outlined above, successful applicants had to agree to carry out the supported activity in cooperation with an educational institution (e.g., by presenting the profession to young people in upper primary schools who are about to choose a career). Other important criteria for support included the linkage of the activity to the development of other microenterprises in the region, energy-saving and renewable energy use, and the employment of women.

Under this package of measures, 57 applications were supported for a total amount of HUF 157,965,719. The maximum eligible amount was set at HUF 10,000,000 per application (with a maximum of HUF 200,000 for events and HUF 500,000 for training).

Of the total number of applicants, 57.9% were micro-enterprises, 31.6% were individuals, and 7% were smallholders. Among the successful applications, there was one from a municipality and one from a natural person. The use of the awarded funds was highly varied: for farmers, the purchases included a robot for making honey cream, machinery for producing local products (seed drill, dehydrator, packer, jam maker), a lavender harvester, a mobile garage, and a tent. Most micro-enterprises also acquired equipment for their activities, such as a camera, a laptop, a mini excavator, surveying equipment, installation of a solar panel system, construction of a warehouse, creation of a car repair workshop, development of equestrian services, development of a carpentry workshop, and purchase of veterinary equipment. Private individuals also applied for funding to purchase similar equipment (trailers, containers, gazebos, distilleries, etc.). The grants awarded varied widely by activity and use area, ranging from HUF 900,000 to HUF 10,000,000.

One municipality (in Hédervár) used the funding to build a marketplace and sales area, while one individual used it to purchase equipment for photography and filmmaking. Geographically, most applications were received from the Upper Szigetköz (Hédervár, Darnózséli, Kimle, Halászi, Dunakiliti, Kísbodak, Máriakálnok).

3.5. Package of measures 5: Development of tourism services and cooperation

Tourism and related services play a very important role in the region's economy. This package of measures was designed to promote economic development through tourism by strengthening the sector's income-generating capacity, providing alternative income-generating opportunities, and facilitating cooperation between operators. Aid was available to natural persons, micro-enterprises, municipalities, non-profit organisations, and church legal entities.

The eligible activities were as follows:

- Development of new or existing accommodation, camps, or community accommodation,
- Development of tourist services not linked to accommodation (e.g., bicycle storage, kitchen equipment),
- Development of a tourist information system (e.g., website),
- Beach, boat, and marina development,
- Preparation and purchase of marketing tools (e.g., brochures, posters),

- Development of new accommodation, and
- Acquisition of equipment (e.g., bicycles).

An additional selection criterion was the promotion of networking. Applicants could only carry out the development in cooperation with a tourism service provider to achieve a coherent presentation of village accommodation.

A total of nine applications were supported under this package of measures, for a total amount of HUF 46,549,807. Of these, one was submitted by a municipality, two by natural persons, and six by micro-enterprises. The maximum eligible amount was set at HUF 10,000,000 per application.

Natural persons used the funding to develop the Cseresznyés House in Lipót and a guest house in Lébény. The municipality of Vének used the grant for construction work. Among the micro-enterprises, a lawnmower and a canoe were purchased in Kimle, while accommodation services and accommodation development were carried out in Dunakiliti, Halászi, and Máriakálnok. In Győrújfalu, a tourist centre was established, and equipment for horse-riding training was purchased. The majority of the projects focused on modernising accommodation facilities or purchasing related equipment, although there were also examples of canoe purchases as part of beach, boat, and harbour development.

3.6. Sustainability impact assessment

In the region, 177 out of 217 projects were implemented during the 2014–2020 period /Szigetköz-Mosoni-Sík Leader Egyesület (SZMSLE) (2023)/. These developments have created jobs, community spaces, support for disadvantaged people, and new services, all of which contribute to the development of the local rural area (Figure 6).

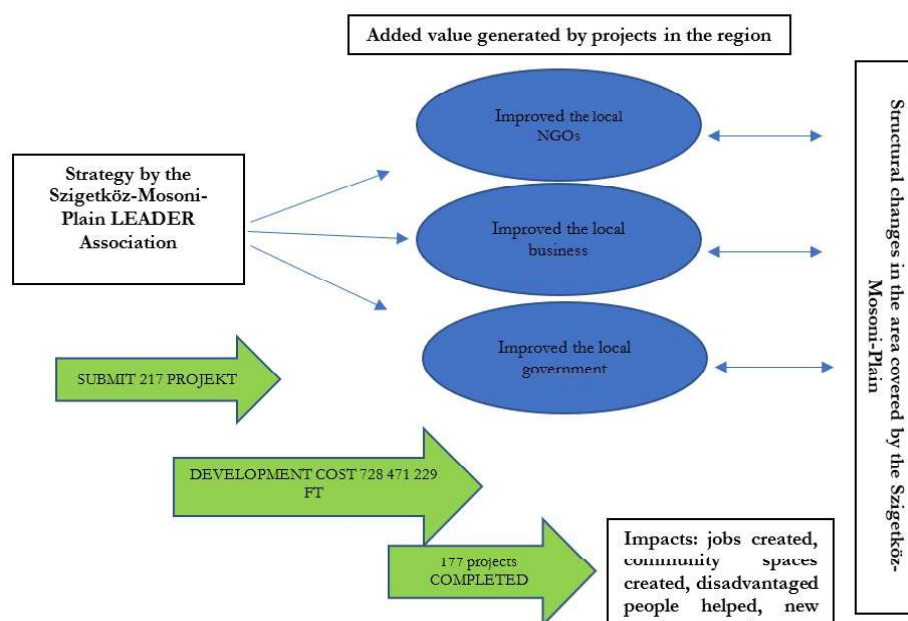


Figure 6: Intervention Theory of LEADER

Source: the authors, based on EC (2017)

A summary assessment according to the sustainability criteria described in the methodology section is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Sustainability Appraisal of Investments in the Packages of Measures in the SZMSLE Area Under Study

Package of measures	Levelling measure	Focusing on the environment/ environmental protection	Social Welfare'	Strengthening the competitiveness of economy	Taking environmental and social aspects into account	Strengthening environmental protection and economic interests	Developments responding to social and economic challenges
Support for initiatives to preserve, improve accessibility, and raise awareness of our natural, cultural, historical, and built heritage	1	5	6	3	7	4	2
Development of local civil society organisations	1	2	7	3	5	4	6
Programmes and community initiatives for the development of intellectual and community life in rural areas and the transfer of knowledge	1	2	7	5	4	3	6
Developing local producers and entrepreneurs	1	2	4	7	3	5	6
Development of tourism services and cooperation	1	2	5	7	3	4	6
		13	29	25	22	20	26

Source: the authors

The primary objective of the LEADER programme is to promote the catching-up of lagging rural areas (i.e., reducing regional disparities and enabling less developed regions to converge with more prosperous ones). For this reason, the maintenance category was assigned a score of 1 for all packages of measures. When packages of measures are aggregated by sustainability category based on conclusions drawn from implemented investments, it becomes clear that the greatest attention was paid to developing social well-being, while the least to measures focused on the environment and environmental protection.

4. Conclusion

In our study, the development projects supported by the Szigetköz–Mosoni-Plain LEADER Association, which is responsible for implementing the LEADER programme and unites several landscape units in western Hungary, were classified into support programme groups. During the analysis, the supported projects were also evaluated and ranked according to sustainability criteria. The uniqueness of the study lies in operationalising the LEADER programme's intervention theory model by examining the work of the studied LEADER association during the 2014–2020 period and identifying how the sustainability approach has evolved through the implemented projects.

In its development strategy, the regional LEADER association set the following main objectives for the 2014–2020 period: preserving the value of natural assets, improving the quality of life of the population, increasing the region's population retention capacity, developing local businesses, supporting NGOs and municipalities, and promoting the market penetration of local products. The Szigetköz–Mosoni-Plain Association will continue its work in the future, for which it has prepared the Local Rural Development Strategy 2023–2027. The main support objectives of this strategy will be to improve the image and quality of life in the settlements, strengthen local identity, develop local civil society organisations, and stimulate the local economy.

The Local Action Group under review set the same main objectives for the 2014–2020 period: the preservation of natural assets, the improvement of the population's quality of life in the region, the enhancement of the region's population retention capacity, the development of local businesses, the support of NGOs and municipalities, and the promotion of local products in the market. To achieve these objectives, five sets of measures were implemented, providing local actors with access to resources totalling more than HUF 700,000,000. The largest number of payments was made under the Local Entrepreneurs Development and Quality Product Supply Initiative Programme. The other packages of measures were also popular among regional actors; for example, they helped to modernise streets and buildings, organise events, increase the proportion of green spaces, purchase sports equipment, and set up a tourist centre.

The sustainability assessment shows that the five packages of measures were dominated by the implementation of tenders and projects aimed at creating social well-being in the region. Developments that address economic and social challenges ranked second-highest. These developments were a priority in the strategy, along with enhancing the region's economic competitiveness, which ranked third in the evaluation criteria. Among the sustainability pillars, applications explicitly targeting environmental sustainability were less frequent. However, in our opinion, in the pursuit of sustainability, the environmental pillar should be regarded as equally important alongside social well-being, as it contributes to the long-term quality of life for society. The conservation or improvement of the quality of natural resources should be increased through conscious planning, along the lines of targeted or thematic developments (a simple example is more conscious planning of green spaces in residential areas through creative projects, as the pace of development is becoming increasingly intensive in rural areas, often to the detriment of the natural environment).

In the next phase of the research, we would like to conduct a similar study with LAGs across different parts of the country and compare the projects implemented by these organisations to determine the extent to which sustainability aspects are taken into account.

Conflict of interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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