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INVOLVEMENT OF LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS IN LEADER (2007–2013) PROGRAMME PARTNERSHIPS IN EASTERN GERMANY: NETWORK THINKING AND CONTEXT EFFECTS

Abstract. This paper addresses the application of the LEADER (2007–2013) programme in the rural areas of Eastern Germany. Adopting a monograph approach and structuralist methods of sociology, it analyses the forms of participation of the local stakeholders and the operation of the action system that supports the collective approach towards local development. The analysis examines the hypothesis that the learning of the LEADER approach, based on endogenous development practices and principles of local governance, is related to effects of geographical context formed by spatial configuration, the structure of the local economy, and the heritage of the past.

Keywords: LEADER Program, rural development policies, local development, local government, public interventions, social networks, Germany, new *Länder*, Thuringia, European Union.

1. Introduction

In Eastern Germany, experience with the LEADER¹ programme goes back to the early 1990s. Following political reunification, the rural territories of the former GDR automatically benefited from the first three campaigns of the EU's programme for rural

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LEADER (*Liaisons Entre Actions de Développement de l'Economie Rurale*) is the name given since 1990 to the European Union's intervention programme in support of rural areas.

areas: LEADER I (1990–1993), LEADER II (1994–1999) and LEADER+ (2000–2006). The geographical zoning of the European Union’s regional policy from the early 1990s covered almost all the territory of the Federal Republic’s new *Länder* and led to the formation of programme application perimeters that have gradually become denser over time (Lacquement 2008).

The LEADER approach involves a policy drive to promote the socio-economic development of rural areas by local initiatives, organised by partnerships between stakeholders within procedures of contractualisation with higher levels in the territorial system. The LEADER programme embodies the paradigm of endogenous development. It assumes the involvement of local stakeholders in cooperation networks to design and implement development projects. These forms of cooperation introduce new practices of territorial management referring to the “local governance” paradigm, whose principles remove public action from the monopoly of institutions and the administration and transfer it to groups of stakeholders of varying backgrounds and skills (Leloup, Moyart, Pecqueur 2005). In this respect the LEADER approach is designed to unite initiatives from public administration, the voluntary sector, trade unions, and companies.

This way of designing and practising public intervention has brought about a considerable upheaval in administrative and management practice in the rural areas of the former GDR, which were rapidly decollectivized (Lacquement 1996). The principles of local governance in general, and the LEADER approach in particular, require real social learning from local societies in order to develop necessary new skills, become acquainted with the new procedures, and organise networks of new partnerships.

Current trends in Eastern Germany provide an opportunity for studying the forms of social learning that now involve local populations in the practices of local governance and the formation of action groups to drive socio-economic development in rural areas. This paper analyses the networks of stakeholders that have started to work together within the LEADER programme. It is a monograph examining the membership of the European programme partnerships (Part 1) and the types of participation of local stakeholders (Part 2). Part 3 describes the nature of the links established between

network members in order to understand the operation of the action system which underpins the collective approach to local development.

2. The representation of local society in LEADER programme partnerships

Application of the LEADER programme in Germany is managed by a system based on the federal *Länder*, which have extensive powers concerning regional planning and local development (Tietz, ed. 2007). The management system lays down principles on how the programme is to be applied and, in particular, the choice of members for the local action groups (LAGs) to steer the projects.

Analysis of the general information from the relevant ministries and specialist agencies² reveals differences in management structure between local action groups. The LEADER approach is mainly run either by local district (*Kreis*) administrations or voluntary sector structures. The balance varies from one *Land* to another according to the legislative variations within the federal system, with no significant differences between the old (West) and new (East) *Länder*. Under the preconditions for their approval, all the local action groups (LAGs) also involve partnerships with administrative officials, entrepreneurs, and voluntary sector stakeholders. The general information gleaned from these partnerships makes it possible to monitor the extension of the LEADER approach within the country and perceive the variable ability of local stakeholders to meet the “top down” requirements to set up a local management structure (Lacquement 2008).

2

Deutsche Vernetzungsstelle LEADER.

3. Case study: Henneberger Land LEADER region in western Thuringia

In order to understand the network thinking that underpins the action system for endogenous development, it is necessary to have a better understanding of the structure by analysing both its membership and the social dynamics that led to its establishment. To that end, local action groups may be observed on the ground by means of a survey questionnaire in order to understand the nature of their members' involvement and follow the process of social learning.

This monograph, while not exhaustive, is representative of current processes in Eastern Germany³. The *Henneberger Land* LEADER region lies in the western part of the *Land* (Free State) of Thuringia. Its name comes from the House of Henneberg, which began agricultural colonisation and proto-industrial development here in the Middle Ages. Its perimeter comprises 84 municipalities (*Gemeinden*), covering 127,000 hectares with a 2010 population of just under 140,000. Despite continuing depopulation as the result of outmigration and a low birth rate, rural densities are still fairly high (approximately 110 per sq. km) in this part of the German central uplands located on both sides of the River Werra between the Rhön hills and the western edge of the Thuringian Forest uplands.

The LEADER 2007–2013 programme action perimeter corresponds in part to the boundaries of the earlier LEADER II and LEADER+ programmes. It follows the boundaries of the Schmalkalden and Meiningen districts, which were merged in the 1992 administrative and territorial reform implemented following reunification, and now extends as far as places in the Suhl urban district, included in the perimeter after the boundary criteria were simplified.

3

The survey was supported by the ALDETEC research programme (No. ANR-08-BLAN-0270-01) financed by the French national research agency ANR.

3.1. Membership of the Henneberger Land local action group

The arrival of the new LEADER programme (2007–2013) in this part of western Thuringia meant that a new local action group had to be set up, with the following membership structure. LAG members belong to one of two distinct bodies: the management committee (*Vorstand*) is a small group that prepares applications with logistic support from the manager and permanent staff. The advisory council (*Fachbeirat*) comprises all the other LAG members and sits together with the management committee to form a general meeting in charge of discussing proposals and taking decisions.

The LAG membership structure reveals how the LAG manager did his best to meet the eligibility criteria in designing the geographical distribution of its representation (Table 1). First, the management committee includes elected officials and civil servants. It also includes representatives of the two main towns, Meiningen and Schmalkalden, which under the GDR were the administrative centres of two districts and are now the combined seats of the district formed in 1992. It also includes an elected official from the Suhl urban district, because the new LEADER system intends to integrate periurban areas into the design of local development strategies. Then, each of the new groups of municipalities was considered and, with a couple of exceptions, was allowed to delegate one of its elected officials.

Table 1. Membership of the management board (*Gesamtvorstand*) of the *Henneberger Land* Local Action Group (Thuringia)

Public administration	Companies	Associations and civil society
Management Committee (<i>Vorstand</i>)		
– mayor of municipality – district representative	– head of farmers' cooperative – head of farmers' cooperative (representative of the largest agricultural union) – manager of an incubator for innovative companies (*)	– representative of the Protestant church
Advisory Council (<i>Fachbeirat</i>)		

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – mayor of municipality – mayor of municipality – mayor of municipality – mayor of municipality – mayor of municipality – board representative of the City of Meiningen – board representative of the City of Schmalkalden – board representative of the City of Suhl – district representative – district representative (*) – representative of the rural development office 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – head of farmers' cooperative – head of farmers' cooperative (*) – representative of a management consultancy company – representative of the chamber of commerce and industry – representative of the chamber of crafts – representative of the savings bank in the district (*) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – representative of the largest agricultural union – representative of a youth association (*) – representative of the Red Cross in Schmalkalden – manager of an association for local development (*) – manager of an association for the protection of the landscape (*) – representative of an adult education centre – manager of the regional nature park (*) – manager of the association for the environmental protection
Local Action Group Manager (*)		

(*) = Women members

Source: Regionale AktionsGruppe RAG e.V. Region Henneberger Land, *Regionale EntwicklungsStrategie RES Henneberger Land, Wettbewerbsbeitrag zur Auswahl von LEADER-Regionen im Freistaat Thüringen 2007-2013, Langfassung*, Meiningen, 2007, 50 p.

Secondly, the partnership also includes the voluntary sector. The manager approached all the active associations involved in economic and social life: Red Cross, youth groups, women's groups, and not least the countryside management association, the environmental protection association and the regional development association, which took over land management and infrastructure missions under the institutional relations established with the local administration.

The third group of partners come from the business world. Farm cooperative heads, i.e., managers of the farming structures which took over from the Communist collective farms, are well placed on the management committee, whereas other business sectors are indirectly represented by the members of chambers of commerce, industry and handicrafts.

3.2. Creeping standardisation in the representation of local societies?

The normative aspect of the contractualisation process, based on the principles of new governance, and which have been established as eligibility criteria, appears to have frozen the membership of the endogenous development cooperation networks. They seem to have produced a standardised representation of local society. Most of the LAGs in the country almost invariably include representatives of municipalities and districts in the action perimeter, members of the main professional organisations in the farm, tourism and craft sectors, company heads, representatives of major trade unions and voluntary-sector workers in the field of heritage conservation, protection of the environment and landscape, sport and culture.

From one candidacy period to the next, the rules vary in normative aspects but ultimately oblige the manager to put together the steering group in an almost automatic manner, by inviting local stakeholders because of their vocational status or level of administrative responsibility in order to achieve the balance of representativeness insisted upon by the decision-making bodies of the *Länder* or Federal government.

3.3. Involvement of local stakeholders in the LEADER approach: formalisation or buy-in to network thinking?

The way the LAGs are put together may be interpreted as a sort of formalisation of the LEADER approach, of managing local initiatives within increasingly binding norms laid down at high levels in the territorial system. This trend has gradually strengthened from one LEADER programme to the next. Whereas in the early 1990s the rapid restructuring of the Communist collective farms favoured the emergence of innovative, proactive approaches (Bruckmeier 2000), informal groups arose, which then took advantage of the early LEADER programmes to continue promoting alternative forms of rural development during the difficult transition of the agricultural economy and the adaptation of collective farm structures.

However, the relative standardisation of LAG membership does not necessarily prejudice the formalisation of the LEADER approach and its network thinking. The

general adoption of norms, even if they are increasingly binding, does not inevitably determine the process of social learning, which is primarily measured by the involvement of individuals in the network.

3.4. Unequal involvement of local stakeholders in the cooperation network

The questionnaire-based survey of the *Henneberger Land* LAGs shows that the involvement of the various stakeholders in the coordination network of the LEADER approach is extremely uneven⁴. Prospects for funding divide them into those stakeholders genuinely involved in designing and implementing projects, and those invited to join because of the representative nature of their status or activity. The latter group shows little interest in the collective approach and the programme itself, and their involvement is largely formal. The former group, on the other hand, makes a large number of proposals and joins the consultation and decision bodies. In particular, they include the most active local elected officials, voluntary sector representatives concerned with spatial planning, and the managers of farmers' cooperatives, within a system of relationships and mutual knowledge inherited from the local solidarity formed during the Communist period and revived by the introduction of new local development policies.

This situation reflects the length of time most LAG members have been involved in the earlier LEADER programmes (I, II and LEADER+) and the other local development schemes introduced into Eastern Germany since the early 1990s, particularly those programmes that invited people to design development projects for inter-municipal cooperation (L a c q u e m e n t 2007). The LAG board is made up of people who seem perfectly aware of the political and financial importance of the contractualisation procedures that now underpin endogenous development approaches.

4

The questionnaire was initially administered in May 2009 to a sample comprising ten members of the Local Action Group (LAG) of the *Henneberger Land* LEADER region (mayors, administrative managers, farmers, representatives of voluntary associations for local development, landscape management and nature protection). During field trips between May 2009 and May 2011, the author attended LAG meetings particularly concerning the application of the development strategy and interviewed ten or so project proposers individually.

3.5. Learning collective action

These varying levels of involvement partly explain the differing opinions expressed by some of the survey respondents concerning the way the development strategy was conceived. Compared with the earlier versions, the new LEADER programme imposes formal constraints that restrict the field of application of projects, while most members are attached to one sector or one place. The relevant authority in Thuringia, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, has laid down the main guidelines for projects, whose priorities must be the paving/surfacing of country lanes, restoration of public buildings and facilities, and the management of dilapidated heritage buildings in private hands. The longstanding involvement of most LAG members causes them to resist these formal restrictions on content, arousing criticism and withdrawal from some, and inciting the others to examine the new system more closely in order to facilitate the funding of those development projects they have proposed.

The “top down” constraint affects the learning process and requires adaptations from one programme to the next that vary in their effect on individuals’ involvement in the cooperation networks. The LAGs were created as part of a process of social buy-in. Learning involves the cognitive internalisation (Ripoll, Veschambre 2005) of the new system. It presupposes the acquisition of knowledge of the transferred norms and their re-interpretation by the development of collective practices that depend on the local situation, both with respect to the structure of the rural economy and society and the geography of the area. The network structure may indeed present a standardised appearance, but network thinking is expressed primarily in terms of individual motivation and strategies, that then join in a collective approach via the consultation procedures in practice at LAG meetings. Learning network thinking is the result of a collective adjustment of individual strategies situated in the local territory. Consequently, collective action depends on the bonds that are formed between individuals in the network, and underpins the local system of action.

3.6. Operation of the local action system

As prime contractor for the development projects proposed by stakeholders in local society, the LAG is a collective stakeholder whose capacity for action may be measured by the nature and intensity of integration of its members within the cooperation network. Relations between individuals form the structure of the local action system. More than the particular status of individuals in local society, it is these relations that influence the way in which the consultation procedure determines the priorities for development and the choice of projects. The local action system is one of the major factors in territorial dynamics. It has a prior effect on decisions to favour the creation of new businesses, the restoration of rural heritage landmarks, and the introduction or preservation of services for local people. It plays a part in the territorial governance that drives local development.

Collective action within the network depends on the system of relations established between network members. These may vary in intensity and complexity, and consist of both mutual acquaintanceship and interdependence. Acquaintanceship is based on personal closeness and reveals the position of social stakeholders within the network. Interdependence is caused by the desire and need to cooperate and reveals the role of individuals in the steering of the network and the strengthening of its capacity for action. The position and role of individuals are differentiated within the network. They affect those individual perceptions that give some LAG members a prestige or charisma that enhances their influence over collective action and bolsters their leadership in the choice and management of development projects.

To understand the operation of the local action system that steers LEADER programmes in Eastern Germany, this paper includes another monograph applying the structural analysis methods used in sociology. The structuralist paradigm considers the operation of social networks on the basis, not of the sum of relationships formed between individuals, but of the nature of these relationships, which may vary in *density*, *equivalence* and *connectivity*, i.e., interdependence (Forsé 2008). The study of these relationships makes it possible to characterise the structure of the network by identifying stakeholders according to the centrality of their position in the network. The ties between

people in the network form a matrix of *social resources* that facilitate the implementation of projects (Lin 1995). The benefits from these resources increase individuals' *social capital*, and create a sort of added value that is applied to their capacity for action (Lin 1995). The analytical method uses the results of questionnaire-based surveys to construct graphs of relationships that can be used to interpret the structure of the networks.

This study of the *Henneberger Land* LAG local action system identifies the mutual acquaintance bonds formed between members of the cooperation network, examines the ties of interdependence established between them, and describes those stakeholders whose social capital is boosted by the charisma or prestige they enjoy among other group members⁵. Mapping gives a specialized image of the relationships between LAG members and indicates the territorial dimension of the network configuration.

3.7. Network configuration via mutual acquaintance ties

To use the terminology of graph theory (Mercklé 2011), mutual acquaintance in the *Henneberger Land* LAG is characterised by the *density* and *connectivity* of interpersonal relationships⁶ (Figure 1). The number of *arcs* (ties) between *vertices* (individuals) is relatively high. In particular, there are no isolated individuals.

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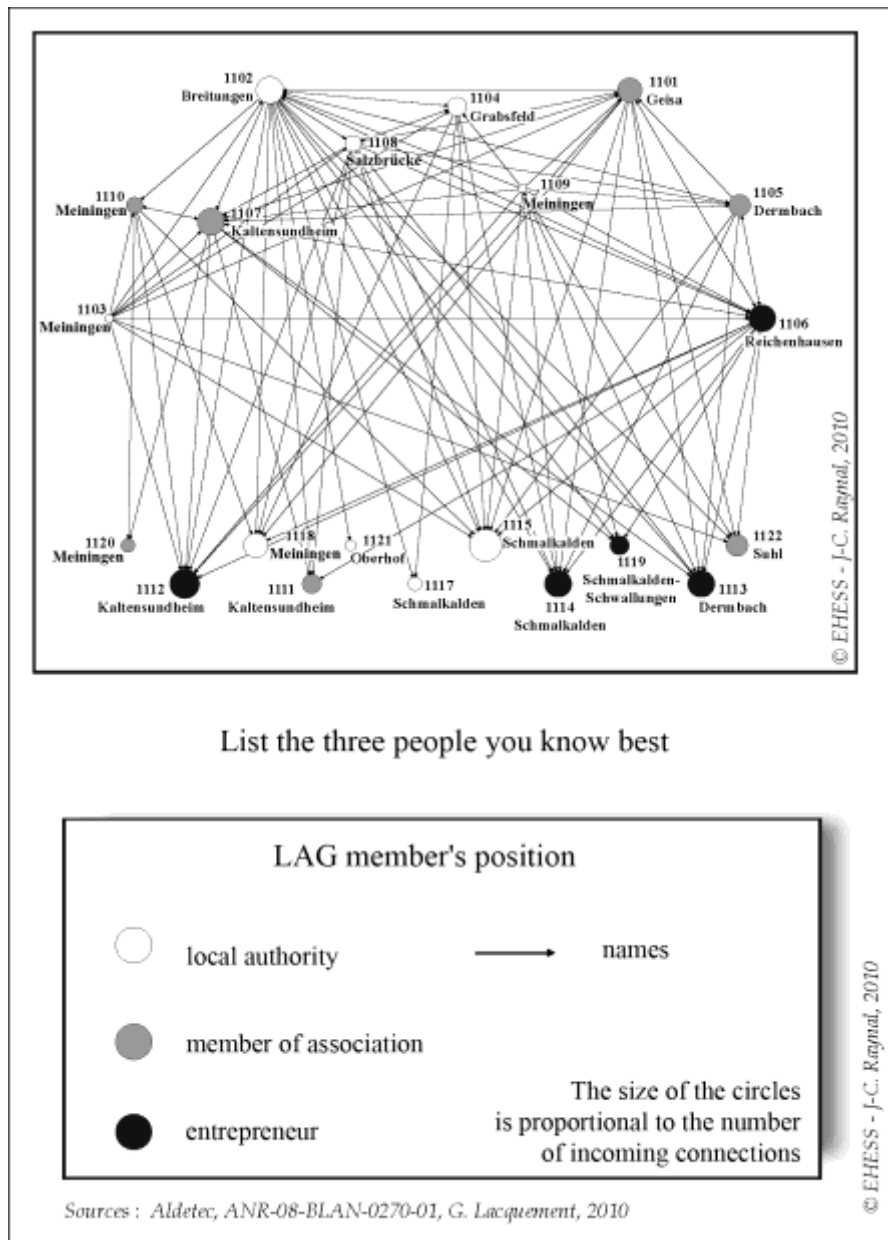
Under the methodology adopted by the ALDETEC research programme team, these three types of relationship between people in the local action group were identified from the responses to the following items in the survey questionnaire: “List the three people you know best” (mutual acquaintance ties), “List the three people you would like to work with to implement the LAG’s strategy (interdependence ties), “List which of these people is most respected” (individual charisma or prestige).

6

The statistical processing and graphical presentation of the survey questionnaire results were done by Lala Razafimahéfa, design engineer at CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique), and Jean-Claude Raynal, design engineer at EHESS (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales).

Relationships of mutual acquaintance are developed via chains that create further ties between individuals.

Figure 1. System of mutual acquaintances among the members of the *Henneberger Land* Local Action Group (Thuringia)



Although the fabric of relationships is not very hierarchical, it does reveal some individuals who are hubs in the mutual acquaintance system. First, there are the representative of the district administration (1115 Schmalkalden), the head of the Rhönland farmers' cooperative, involved in a number of professional farm organisations and currently chairman of the LAG (1112 Kaltensundheim), and the mayor of one of the small towns in the Werra valley (1102 Breitungen). Smaller but noticeable hubs are other two businesspersons, the manager of a consultancy (1114 Schmalkalden) and the head of a company incubator (1113 Dermbach/Schmalkalden). These people owe their notoriety to the activities and responsibilities they exercise at the local level, which tend to increase their opportunity for personal contacts, political or trade union responsibilities for the first three, and activities that help drive the economy for the last two.

Conversely, the mutual acquaintance system tends to marginalise certain individuals who appear to be less integrated into the network. Here the discriminating factor does not appear to be their member status, since the apparently less integrated people are also elected officials, businesspeople, and voluntary sector representatives. In a region that is now on its fourth LEADER programme campaign, relying on a network first set up in the early 1990s, the survey analysis tends to identify the people more recently invited to join under the new eligibility criteria, that requires a balance of backgrounds (elected officials, businesspeople, voluntary sector representatives) and extends the perimeter of the LEADER region, imposed by the Thuringia *Land* government in order to achieve unbroken coverage of its territory. The cooperation network was in this way enlarged to include members who were not accustomed to working together in the previous set-ups, and this has meant a restructuring of mutual acquaintance relationships.

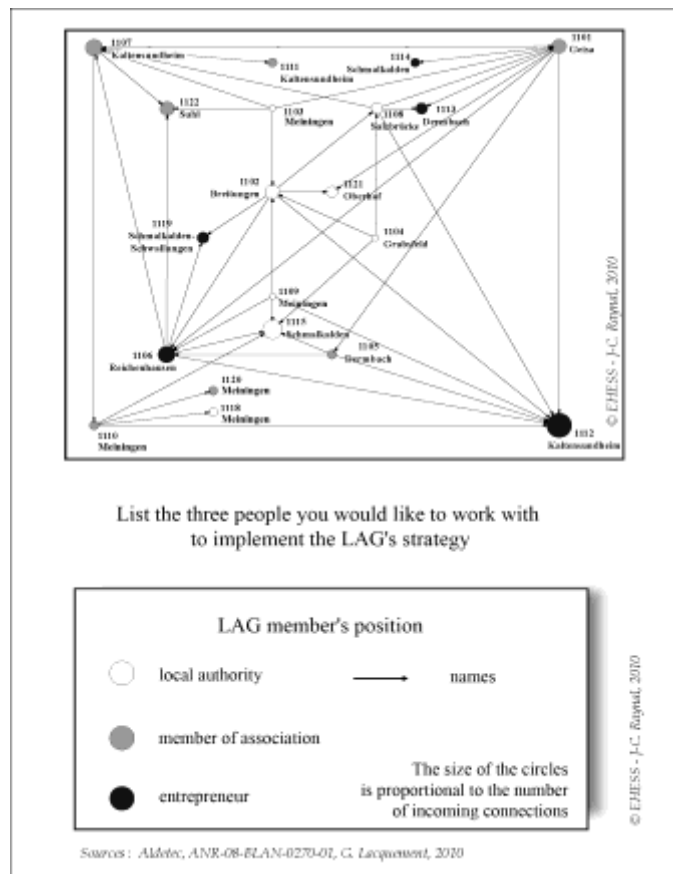
The initial network was formed around the managers of the Rhönland farmers' cooperative in the western part of the region. They were already involved in various local development groups requiring institutional relations with the inter-municipal systems and local development bodies (Rhön biosphere reserve, Rhön regional management association, Rhön landscape management association). The LEADER+ programme (2000–2006) was a further opportunity to develop new relations with local stakeholders in the Werra valley and work with other elected officials involved in reconverting the local economy. The rules applying to the new LAG (2007–2013)

extended the LEADER region’s perimeter eastwards to the Suhl urban district, including part of the Thuringian Forest regional park. This extension introduced a sense of distance and remoteness that upset the balance of the mutual acquaintance network to the advantage of the hub of relations inherited from the previous programme.

3.8. Relations of interdependence between LAG members

Next we examine what interpersonal ties are likely to initiate or facilitate development projects. The relative *density* and *connectivity* of relationships structure the network around a small number of hub persons (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Interdependence ties among the members of the *Henneberger Land* Local Action Group (Thuringia)



In the system of relations, two individuals in particular attract intentions to cooperate. One is the current president of the LAG (1112 Kaltensundheim), who is head of the Rhönland farmers' cooperative, converted to organic farming in the early 1990s. The *edges* or *arcs* converging on him come from the voluntary sector, particularly the head of the regional management body in charge of coordinating the marketing of Rhönland products (1101 Geisa/Meiningen), the farm sector (1106 Reichenhausen) and, not least, elected officials (1102 Breitungen, 1108 Salzbrücke, 1109 Meiningen). These convergences are due not only to the man's status in the LAG but also his long involvement in local political and business life.

The other hub in the system of relations is the representative of the district administration (1115 Schmalkalden). His *arcs* come mainly from local elected officials (1104 Grabsfeld and 1102 Breitungen), the farm sector (1106 Reichenhausen) and the voluntary sector (1105 Dermbach/Schmalkalden and 1110 Meiningen). The existence of this second hub of relations is due to the fact that the local administration has its own network of relations and the position of the person at the top of the local political-administrative hierarchy expresses a sort of guardianship over local initiatives.

The system of relations also reveals individuals of secondary, but not negligible, importance and attractiveness. The head of a farmers' cooperative in the Rhön hills (1106 Rheinhausen), who had longstanding ties of cooperation as a result of his responsibilities first as head of the majority farmers' union and then as president of the LEADER+ (2000–2006) LAG, now has apparently diversified his ties of cooperation with local elected officials (1102 Breitungen and 1115 Schmalkalden), companies (1112 Kaltensundheim) and land management associations (1101 Geisa/Meiningen). Some of the voluntary sector staff appear to play a key role in forming the cooperation network: the number of ties converging on these individuals is less dense but their *connectivity* is high and reveals their longstanding involvement in those networks which are the foundation of the various local development groups: the representatives of the regional management association (1101 Geisa/Meiningen) and the landscape management association (1107 Kaltensundheim) are cases in point.

The configuration of the cooperation network excludes, however, certain LAG members who have found it hard to integrate into territorial solidarities formed during earlier cooperation arrangements dating back to the early 1990s. The extension of the

LAG to the east and the Suhl district was the result of a ruling by the Thuringian ministry. The representatives of this part of the region (1121 Oberhof, 1122 Suhl) appear to be less active, because work habits have not integrated them from the outset into the network of relations and, not least, unlike other LAG members they are not linked by their common participation in other local development groups.

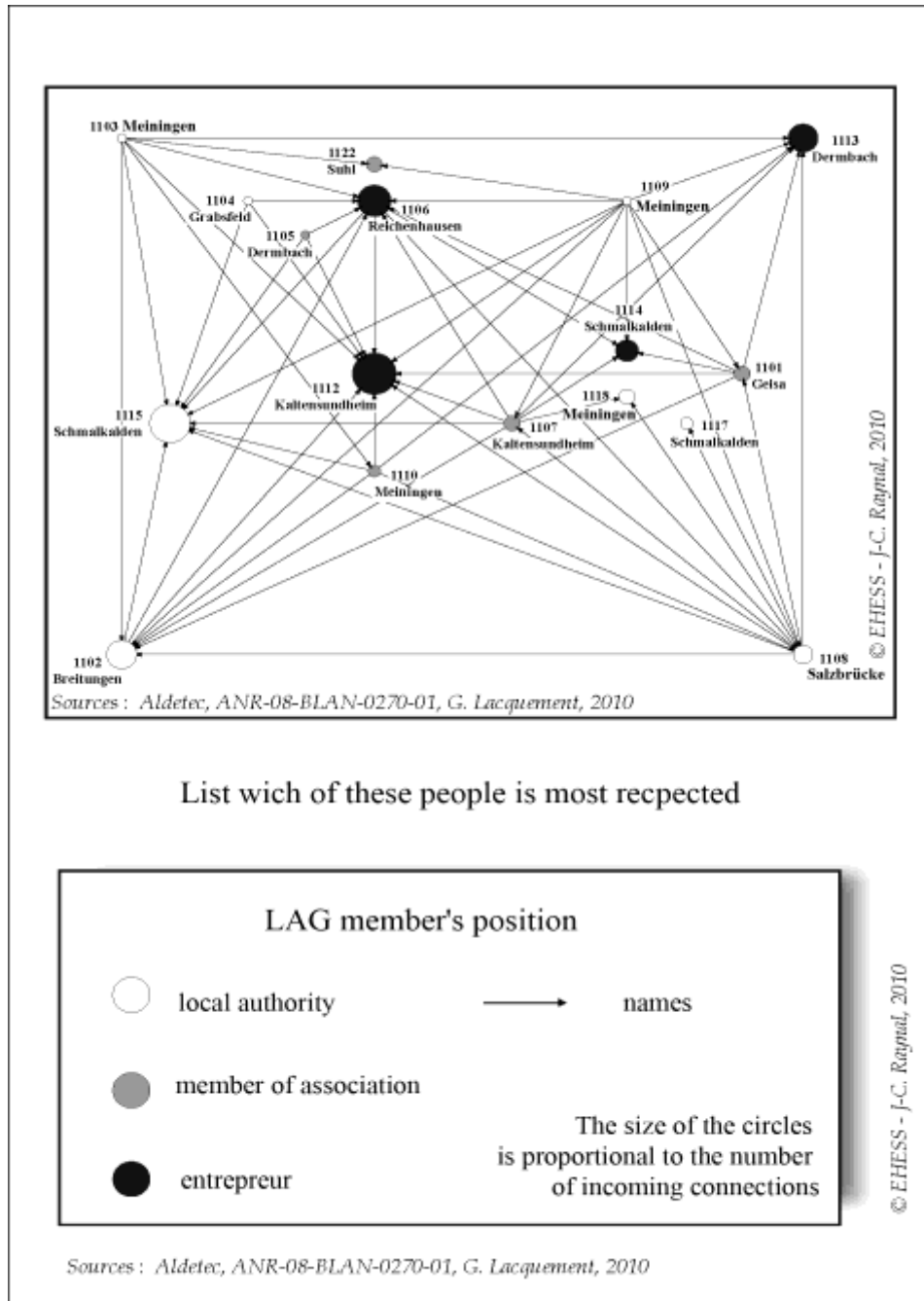
3.9. Hubs of the system of relations within the cooperation network

The third questionnaire item measures the prestige of the individuals in the cooperation network and their consequent ability to influence collective action. On the graph (Figure 3), this is expressed mainly by the density of the relations around certain hubs, while the *connectivity* of the relations reduces the ties of excessive dependence or the subordination of network members to individuals in an apparently dominant position.

The central position appears to be shared among three people. The first is one of the district representatives (1115 Schmalkalden), whose influence expresses mainly the integration of the political role played by this level of local self-government in spatial management between the municipal and *Land* authorities. It may also reveal a sort of guardianship or oversight of local initiative by the administration and authorities at the higher administrative level.

The other two are the two heads of farmers' cooperatives in the Rhön hills (1106 Reichenhausen and 1112 Kaltensundheim), the former president of the LEADER+ LAG and the new president of the LEADER (2007–2013) LAG. They enjoy a prestige due to their personal involvement in political and trade union life and their business activities, which have led them to form a large number of personal contacts and ties of cooperation within the various local development bodies that have been set up since the early 1990s, involving farms both as rural employers and producers of raw material processed in other businesses, tenant farmers of land belonging to a host of smallholders in a region of historically small-scale farming, and as partners in landscape management programmes. They belong to the generation that played a decisive role in the transformation of the system at the start of the 1990s.

Figure 3. Hubs in the system of relations of the *Henneberger Land* Local Action Group (Thuringia)



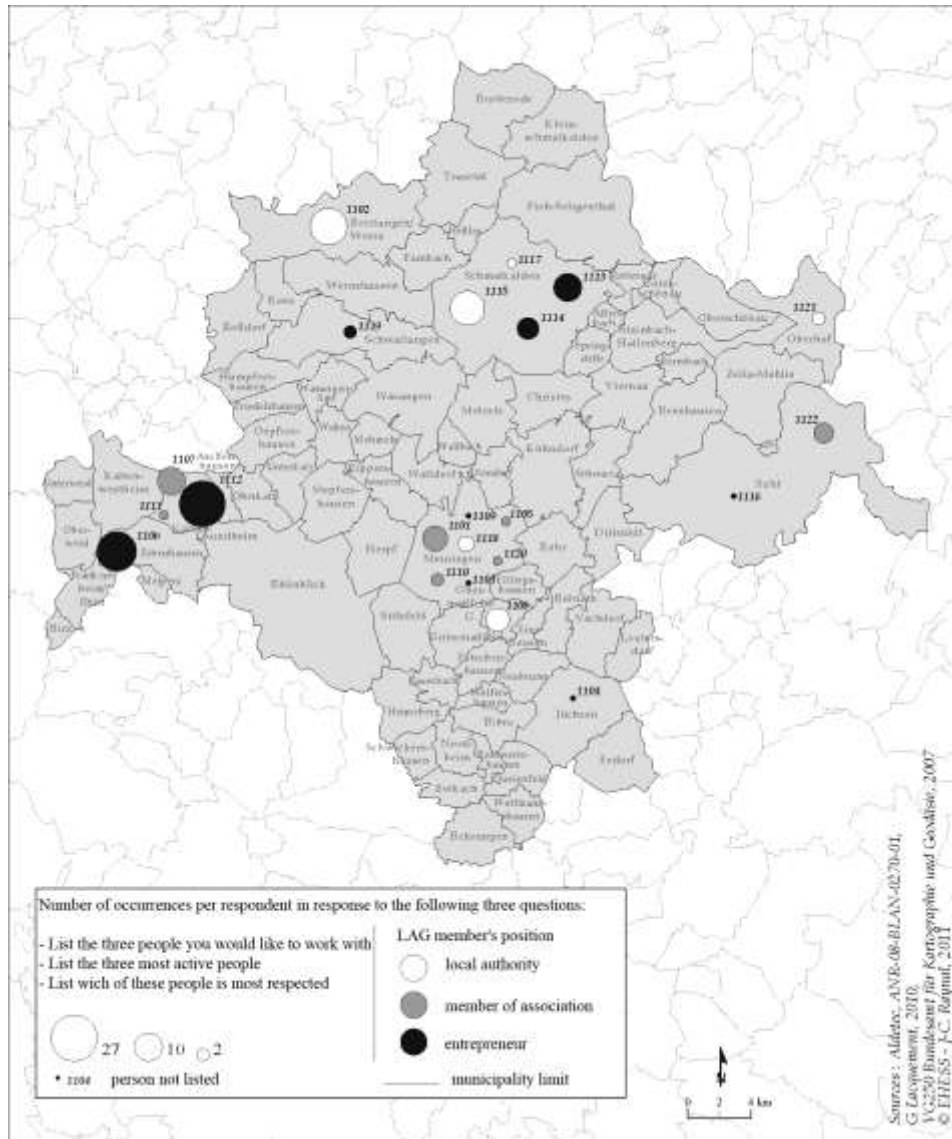
At a secondary level, prestige is held by two other people, the mayor of a small town in the Werra valley (1102 Breitung) and the director of the main enterprise incubator in the region (1113 Dermbach/Schmalkalden). These are 40–50 year-olds, whose prestige comes from their interest in local business life and their personal involvement in diversifying rural activities.

3.10. Central actors and context effects

The mapping of the network of relations (Figure 4) represents the territorial dimension of the LAG hubs who appear to play a decisive role in driving local development. The LEADER approach here is steered mainly by the group of cooperative farmers in the Rhön hills in the west of the intervention perimeter. Ironically, initiative and involvement come from the mountainous edges of the administrative district that is now the basis for the LEADER programme region. This impoverished range of hills, near the old inter-German border and far from everything else, is inhabited by a local society whose members showed themselves able, from the early 1990s, to adapt their economic structures and take over local development bodies. Around the entrepreneurs who undertook the restructuring of the farm sector there formed a group of stakeholders, comprising staff from the spatial management associations and founders of the enterprise incubator, whose head office has now been moved to one of the district's main towns (Schmalkalden).

Collective action is also driven by the involvement of the mayors of the municipalities in the Werra valley. They have been faced with the decline of industry and farming, and their involvement is due to the prerogatives given them by territorial reform when municipal autonomy was restored and more inter-municipal cooperation structures were set up. This is the territorial level at which projects are designed and implemented. The centrality of the *Henneberger Land* LAG network of relations is located, however, among the initiators and pioneers in the Rhön hills, where the adaptation of economic activities has been the work of the entrepreneurs who led the restructuring of the collective farms.

Figure 4. Location of the *Henneberger Land* Local Action Group members in the cooperation network (Thuringia)



4. Conclusions

In the rural areas of Eastern Germany, the LEADER system has gradually gained a position as a central place for learning the principles of endogenous development and local governance. It has helped build more partnerships among stakeholders in local economic and social life. It has encouraged experiments with the participatory approach within cooperation networks set up to drive local development on the basis of intervention programmes – development strategies – defined by consultation.

The bottom-up reversal of rural development policies has apparently gone along with convergence in the management practices for socio-economic development in rural areas to such an extent that there has been a degree of formalisation of the participatory approach. Despite the variations that the German federal system may introduce into the implementation of the programmes, the procedures of contractualisation with higher levels in the territorial system have imposed on the cooperation networks a series of norms, requirements, and criteria determining conditions of eligibility and funding that ultimately amount to controls on local initiative via the standardisation of partnership structures and governance practices.

Governance, however, is differentiated by the geographical background of the recipients (Hirschhausen von 2006). The example of the *Henneberger Land* LAG demonstrates that learning local governance is the result of a buy-in by members of local society within the framework of a *territorialised* process. The adoption of the LEADER approach is based on a complex mechanism operating in three main ways to determine the forms of involvement of local stakeholders in the cooperation network. One is the early date and speed of the post-Communist transformation in the new German *Länder*. In the early 1990s, when territorial reform was restoring local autonomy, the LEADER approach was one of the means of intervention to control the transformation and adaptation of the socio-economic structures inherited from the Communist period. Contemporary practices are thus built on experience that, in some places, goes back twenty years.

The organisation of local space is the second element that plays a decisive role in the establishment of cooperation networks: population densities, distances between settlements, the territorial system, and the structure of the local economy influence the emergence of groups of stakeholders likely to involve themselves in cooperation based on networking.

Third, the buy-in mechanism depends on the way the local action system concentrates collective action around certain stakeholders. Despite the difficulties in adapting local economies imposed by the rapid and radical nature of the market transition in the early 1990s, the post-Communist spatial structures do not appear to act as a brake or obstacle to the dissemination of rural policies based on endogenous approaches and the principles of local governance. But they do contribute to differentiating the membership and operation of the systems of stakeholders that now drive local development.

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