

Benefits of the LEADER method for Local Agenda 21 – Case study from their application in the Czech Republic

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Abstract: The basic characteristic and comparison of the community-led local development tools: Local Agenda 21, used in public administration generally, and of the LEADER method, used within Local Action Groups (LAGs), is presented in this paper. It analyses their application in the Czech Republic. It discusses the potential synergistic effects of the application of these tools in two rural locations – the areas of two towns (Chrudim and Litomerice), which are leaders in the application of Local Agenda 21 in the Czech Republic. Both towns are members of LAGs – LAG Chrudimsko and LAG Ceske Stredohori. This combination of Local Agenda 21 and LEADER method are mutually supportive. The conclusion discusses recommendations for the improvement of community-led development.

Keywords: community-led local development; Local Action Group; public administration; sustainability

In the last 30 years, the area of public administration (PA) has seen a general trend in quality improvement through three basic principles. One of these is an effort towards community-led local development (CLLD), i.e. for a larger involvement of the PA of public affairs. The next principle is the management of public affairs based on high-quality strategic planning, which is obtained from community discussions. The last is a systemic and measurable orientation towards sustainable development. This trend is general, but it is also under the patronage of internationally operating entities, such as the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN). In the area of PA, the UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 approved Agenda 21, a global strategic and action plan of the global commonwealth, specifying particular steps towards sus-

tainable development using Local Agenda 21 (LA21) (UN 1992; Wittmayer et al. 2016).

Coenen (2009) considers LA21 a supra-national initiative that leaves considerable room for cross-national variation in how, when, and why the LA21 idea becomes salient. LA21 is seen as a very helpful tool for increasing effectiveness in PA (Xavier et al. 2019).

Another CLLD tool is an activity at the EU level in the LEADER method (LEADER) form, which has been integrated into rural development policy since 1991. This method also includes procedures that lead to a larger involvement of PA on the local level and interconnect entities in the region. The use of LEADER has spread to all EU member states and is supported by the EU via the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF). This widespread use is achieved through the creation of Local Action Groups (LAGs), creating as-

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sociations on the local level involving representatives of the public, private, and non-profit sectors and citizens (Ballesteros and Hernandez 2019).

Both tools can be applied separately, but given the similarity of both approaches, it is possible to combine them.

This paper aims to examine the perceived benefits of these CLLD tools by giving evidence based on an analysis of two of the most successful municipalities regarding the implementation of LA21 in the Czech Republic (CZ). At the same time, they are both parts of a functional LAG, with benefits resulting from actively applied methods and synergistic effects.

The application of LA21 principles leads to an increased quality of life in all aspects, and also wants citizens to take responsibility for their own lives and lives of the other beings in space and time (Barrutia et al. 2015). LA21 has gradually spread globally. Governments have legislated or advised that local authorities take steps to implement LA21, as recommended in Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 (UN 1992). International cooperation is essential and under the patronage of the UN. In spite of these efforts, there are limitations in the application of LA21 in practice. Zan and Ngah (2012) noticed a lack of public awareness of LA21 and a low level of community participation. Kamaruddin et al. (2016) noticed a low level of awareness of LA21 across society in environmental programmes of LA21. Many published studies show that real-world LA21 practices are far from fitting the ideal LA21 model. Although Wittmayer et al. (2016) felt that LA21 is much more participatory than any earlier local government practices, they note that implementation of LA21 depends on political and organisational adaptation and public expectations. Brandt and Svendsen (2013) focused on LA21 expenses and pointed out the high cost related to solving LA21 problems.

The LEADER approach is recommended for rural development in EU member states. The basic idea of this method is that the people living and working in the given territory make decisions about the future of the region since they know its problems and needs (Ballesteros and Hernandez 2019). In the Programming Period (PP) 2014–2020, the LEADER approach was specified in Article 32 of Regulation (EU) No. 1303/2013, and it was co-financed by ESIF. The LEADER method is based on a bottom-up approach, various types of partnerships, and innovative approaches (Lostak and Hudeckova 2010). The LEADER approach is applied within LAGs, but it is also recommended for local governments. LAGs are established in small homogenous, local areas (10 000 to 100 000 inhabitants,

excluding towns with more than 25 000 inhabitants). More comprehensive application of LEADER in European rural spaces resulted in creating 3 098 LAGs in the EU as of September 30, 2020 (EC 2020). A LAG is an association independent of political decisions, comprising representatives of local administration, public authorities, private business, non-profit organisations, and active citizens. LAGs are integrated into networks [e.g. National Network of Local Action Groups in the Czech Republic (NNLAGCZ), in the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), and in the European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD)] (EC 2019; ELARD 2021).

A LAG aims to improve the quality of all areas of life and the environment in rural areas, strengthen the feeling of belonging to the community and region, and help build capacities leading to long-lasting sustainable development (Mickiewicz and Mickiewicz 2016). According to Lopolito (2011), the application of LEADER empowered by the quantitative assessment of tangible and intangible outputs leads to better utilisation of resources, overall efficiency and sustainability. The problems associated with LEADER are related to implementation. Czech LAGs do not always perceive the partnership principle as crucial and, in some cases, lean toward top-down procedures.

There is more long-term experience abroad with both tools. Masot and Alonso (2015) evaluated the benefits of LEADER until 2013 in Spain positively: LEADER brings a new way to approach development strategies involving local people in decision-making and improving awareness of the potential of their territory. Esparcia et al. (2015) confirm the positive impact of LEADER in creating participatory democracy; on the other hand, they criticised the usage of LEADER as a tool that strengthens local elites. Based on the analysis of LEADER in Austria, Salchner (2013) draws attention to the lack of innovation and the need for more effective practice. In Poland, LEADER is credited for support for the non-profit sector in rural areas; on the other hand, they recognised signs of clientelism (Furmankiewicz et al. 2016).

LA21 is more widespread than LEADER, and many analyses of LA21 implementations are available. An analysis from Turkey is focused on the involvement of youth in local politics in accordance with LA21, but the authors of the analysis recognised that it is insufficient (Golce-Kizilkaya and Onursal-Besgul 2017). Berry and Portney (2017) focused on the negative impact of the Tea Party on the ability of local governments to adopt sustainable policies, including LA21,

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while they also recognised that sustainable trends are sufficiently strong. Burgos and Bocco (2021) reported that the orientation of LA21 objectives and processes in Mexico is at a high level, but the outputs have uncertain impacts. Guerra et al. (2020) evaluated the experience with LA21 in Portugal and Brazil. They identified the causes of insufficient LA21 implementation, which included structural constraints in times of economic difficulties and the inherited centralist traditions of local government. However, the awareness of LA21 as participatory, bottom-up development in local communities spread. Diaz-Sarachaga (2019) analysed the situation in Spain, with the Spanish Urban Agenda planned to spread the LA21 in municipalities nationwide by 2030. Based on the experience with implementation, it seems that social engagement is insufficient. A similar problem is presented by Xavier et al. (2019) based on the experience from Brazil, where they recognised the low level of public participation. They propose that gradually greater involvement and social training are essential for the future development of LA21. It is therefore important to compare the most successful implementers to gain good experience.

Available studies are focused on LEADER or LA21, but the impact LEADER and LA21 in combination have not been presented in the available literature. This paper thus represents a unique analysis combining both similarly oriented tools.

Although the CZ participated in the creation of Agenda 21 in Rio de Janeiro, the sustainable development concept was ignored by authorities for a long time. The Government Council for Sustainable Development (GCSD), which started addressing sustainable development issues step by step, was not established until 2003. In 2004, a newly established Workgroup for LA21 defined LA21 Criteria, which were adapted for all types of municipalities in 2010. In January 2012 (20 years after Rio de Janeiro), the Czech Government approved

the first document called 'The Strategy of LA21 Support in the CZ until 2020'. In 2014, a new Council for Sustainable Municipalities was established under the GCSD. This council aims to ensure the synergy of sustainable development tools in cities, towns, villages, and regions, which include solving LA21 problems or implementing Healthy Cities.

The quality of LA21 activities is currently monitored using LA21 Criteria, and their fulfilment is shown in the LA21 Database. LA21 Criteria recommend dividing the LA21 entities into four basic categories from A (highest) to D (lowest), and a so-called 'zero category' of applicants. Small municipalities, municipalities, microregions, regions, LAGs, and other organisations, private, non-governmental, non-profit organisations and companies can prove the application of LA21 in practice and the level of LA21 they have achieved by adhering to LA21 Criteria. The number of entities registered in LA21 is not very large, and although they are growing from year to year, the proportion of the total number of potential entities is still low but stable. Table 1 shows the category achieved under LA21 Criteria. The highest (category A) has been reached by two municipalities (Chrudim, Litomerice).

Kveton et al. (2013) indicated that LA21 in the CZ is strongly oriented towards the environmental pillar; municipalities applying LA21 have a noticeable impact, which is greater than in municipalities not applying LA21. However, they criticise the low level of awareness of LA21 benefits, the political support for LA21 and insufficient publicity.

In the CZ there are 179 LAGs, and most of them (167) are part of the NNLAGCZ, which aims to integrate, represent, promote, popularise, and protect the interests of member LAGs. A total of 5 873 out of 6 210 municipalities were involved in LAGs as of October 9, 2018 (NNLAGCZ 2019). NNLAGCZ drew up a strategic position document to prepare rural development poli-

Table 1. The level of LA21 implementers under LA21 Criteria

Category	Implementers	Degree of public involvement in planning and decision-making
A	2	mastering the process of participation in all thematic areas of the authorities' activities
B	4	mastering the participation process in most of the thematic areas of the authorities' activities
C	46	mastering advanced methods of participation, i.e. the ability to involve the public in all phases of the decision-making process
D	31	individual events with public involvement are organised
Applicants	89	aimed at involving the public in planning and decision-making
LA21	172	–

LA21 – Local Agenda 21

Source: Healthy Cities (2020)

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cies within the PP 2014–2020 called National Strategic Plan LEADER 2014+. This document suggests the broad application of the LEADER in all operational programmes of ESIF targeted at rural areas. According to this document, using LEADER, LAGs are perceived as the basic body of CLLD and they operate in compliance with the approved CLLD Strategy that is formulated for each region.

Fundamental benefits of LA21 for the involved entities are the assessment of the current level of LA21, which compares the quality of a group's own development to other entities; the possibility of obtaining financial support for LA21 activities; and overall improvements in the development in the following areas through sets of criteria especially for *i*) the organisation itself, education and assessment of LA21 activities; *ii*) active involvement of the public in planning and making decisions; *iii*) a presentation of activities, outputs, and positive impacts of LA21; and *iv*) relationships between PA and the non-profit business sector. However, the main benefit is contributing to sustainable development from the public point of view and the point of view of involved entities (Wittmayer et al. 2016).

Masot and Alonso (2017) and ELARD (2021) include as benefits of LEADER implemented in LAGs *i*) the development of infrastructure and strengthening local government; *ii*) the support of a local dynamic economy, increased financial resources and utilisation of local services; and *iii*) the increased capacity, achievement of justice for everybody and enrichment of social capital and 'welfare'. These benefits have been identified as slowing down the depopulation of rural areas, positively affecting policies with an impact on rural areas, increased involvement of the public and the role of civic society, building new capacities, jobs, companies in rural areas, and the protection of the environment (Wade and Rinne 2008).

The benefits identified for LA21 and LAGs imply a high rate of concordance, especially in the declared high rate of achieved cooperation between different actors and sectors and the involvement of local actors in decision-making, planning, or implementation processes (Coenen 2009). Both tools focus on cooperation aiming to exchange information, making comparisons, learning lessons and mutual assistance.

In the CZ, there is an apparent difference in the approach to LA21, which has been mediated by standardisation managed by an advisory body of the government (top-down), compared to the decentralised system based on LEADER (bottom-up). Therefore, LA21 and LAGs do not meet very often in practice, which is also

evidenced by the relatively low number of LAGs involved in LA21. As a result, a combination of top-down (LA21) and bottom-up (LAGs – LEADER) concepts lead to positive benefits. They have been summarised by Schmidt et al. (2006), who state that it is vital for the success of LA21 to have a democratic concept of the bottom-up principles, involving all significant actors (not only politically elected PA).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The paper is based on a literature review of available theoretical resources and on documentation at the European and at a national level, where it was necessary – especially for the implementation of LA21 – to proceed from the methodologies coordinated by the CZ government authorities. As for LAGs, publicly available information about the number and structure of LAGs in the CZ was drawn from the NNLAGCZ. As for the case study, the analysis for LA21 in the town of Chrudim and for the LEADER approach in the LAG Chrudimsko was conducted during November 2018, and the analyses in the town of Litomerice and LAG Ceske Stredohori were conducted during April 2019 (Figure 1). The available documentation was studied, and structured interviews were conducted with two managers responsible for LA21 in Chrudim and Litomerice, and with two SCLLD managers of LAG Chrudimsko and LAG Ceske Stredohori.

The case study covered an area with functional LA21 and LAG. The authors selected two areas in the CZ with the best implementation of LA21. The town of Chrudim has been assessed in LA21 since 2001, for the last seven years in category A. The town of Litomerice has been assessed in LA21 since 2006, for the last five years in category A. Both towns make use of LAGs, namely LAG Chrudimsko and LAG Ceske Stredohori. For this reason, it is possible to compare both tools in the same area and verify which benefits are fulfilled through these tools.

LA21 Chrudim and LA21 Litomerice. Both cities are well-developed centres of their regions with schools, cultural institutions, and large infrastructure in social care, services, and established industries. LA21 has been implemented in both cities in the form of a long-term project called: 'Healthy City and LA21' based on the internationally valid documents of Health 21, Agenda 21 and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Healthy Cities 2020).

Both LA21 projects are based on Strategic Plans and implemented through Action Plans and its projects

LOCAL ACTION GROUPS
in the Czech Republic
to the date 30. 4. 2021

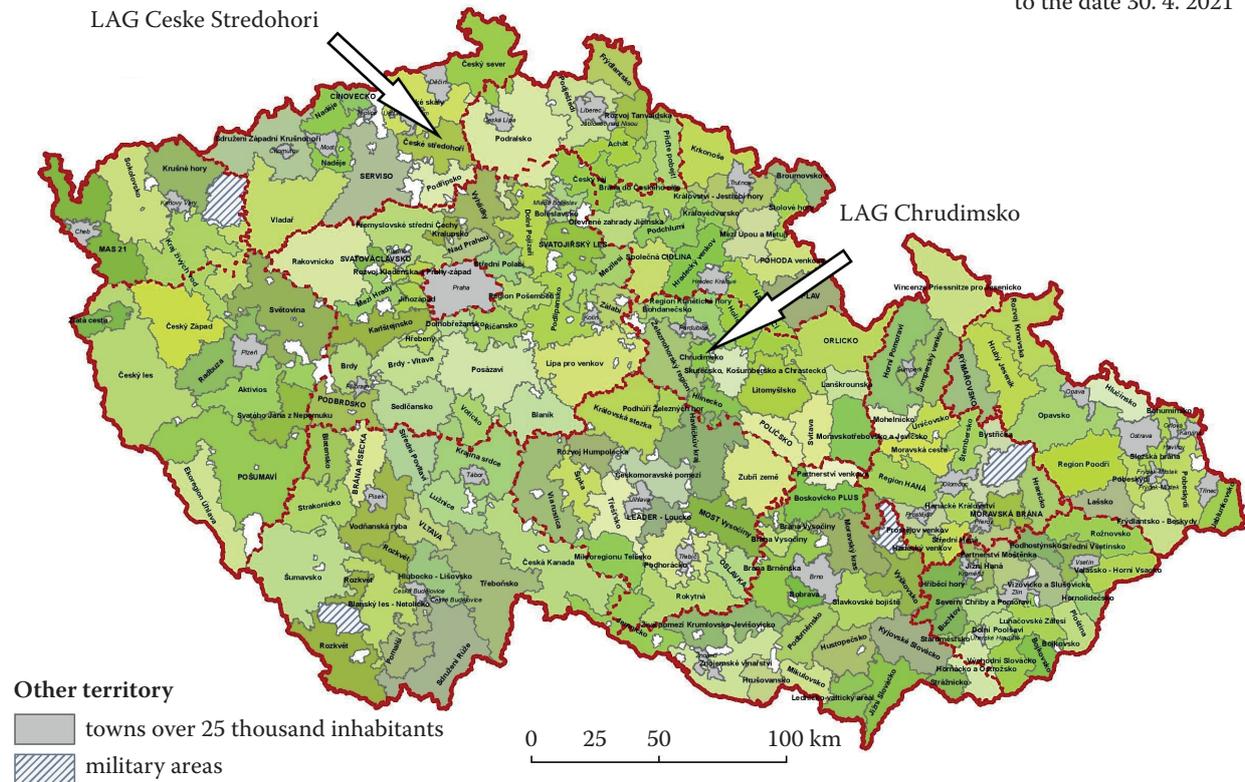


Figure 1. Map of LAGs in the Czech Republic

LAGs – Local Action Groups

Source: NNLAGCZ (2021), modified

and events. The Strategic and Action Plans are community-oriented, and they specify partial plans in four essential areas: economic, environmental, social, and high-quality community management.

LAG Chrudimsko and LAG Ceske Stredohori. LAG Chrudimsko was founded in 2012. Its total area is 106 km², and 32 160 people lived in the area as of December 31, 2014. LAG Chrudimsko currently has 41 members, including the town of Chrudim – the natural centre of the region. Its main activity in 2012–2017 was creating and implementing the Strategy of CLLD (SCLLD). In several activities, LAG Chrudimsko cooperates with the town of Chrudim and takes part in the project Healthy City Chrudim and LA21. LAG Chrudimsko has also been involved in implementing a number of projects in the areas of education, tourism, and support of regional products. The group aims to implement a long-term SCLLD, using particularly ESIF.

LAG Ceske Stredohori was founded in 2006, its total area is 381 km², and 45 625 people lived in the region as of December 31, 2014. The group currently

has 42 members, including the biggest town in the region – Litomerice. LAG Ceske Stredohori participated in CLLD in PP 2007–2013 as part of a pilot implementation of LEADER in the CZ, and then they implemented the SCLLD in PP 2014–2020 via many projects co-financed by ESIF. Both these LAGs also participate in other educational projects in cooperation with the other LAGs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Perceived benefits. The evaluation of the attitudes as viewed by the respondents was made through one-to-one interviews with LA21 and LAG Chrudimsko representatives and through their agreement with the fact that the benefit is being achieved using the given tool and upon the assessment of the scope of the benefits (Table 2).

As the above agreements regarding individual benefits imply, both tools bring several perceived benefits for local development, even though the outputs of these benefits are not often put into practice immediately.

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Table 2. Benefits and the rate of their achievement

Benefit	LA21 Chrudim				LAG Chrudimsko				LA21 Litomerice				LAG Ceske Stredohori			
	no	rather no	rather yes	yes	no	rather no	rather yes	yes	no	rather no	rather yes	yes	no	rather no	rather yes	yes
Cooperation	cooperation between local authorities/multisector			x				x				x		x		
	cooperation between profit and non-profit sectors			x				x				x		x		
	cooperation between other LA21/LAG groups			x				x		x						x
	cooperation with foreign countries		x			x						x	x			
Involvement	public sector			x				x				x				x
	private sector		x					x				x		x		
	non-profit sector			x				x				x			x	
	young people			x		x						x			x	
	seniors			x			x					x		x		
	women			x			x					x			x	
	families			x			x					x		x		
	volunteers			x			x					x		x		
Economic benefits	financing of projects			x				x				x				x
	building capacities/development of infrastructure			x			x			x					x	
	creation of new jobs and companies		x				x		x						x	
	propagation of innovations			x			x			x				x		
	improved competitiveness of the area		x				x				x				x	
	utilisation of local services/product support			x				x				x			x	
	better exploitation of local resources		x				x					x			x	
Other benefits	protection of the environment			x			x					x		x		
	exchange of experience, know-how, transferring good practice			x			x					x		x		
	co-responsibility of citizens/companies for the condition of the region			x				x				x			x	
	strategic development of the territory			x				x				x			x	
	support of the quality of life and health of the citizens			x				x				x			x	
	influencing of local politics			x			x			x				x		
	stopping rural depopulation		x					x	x					x		
	support of education			x				x				x				x
	raising public awareness of healthy lifestyle			x				x				x	x			
	strengthening of regional togetherness of the citizens, responsibility and interest in development of the region			x				x				x			x	

LA21 – Local Agenda 21; LAG – Local Action Group

Authors' own findings based on structured interviews and available documents of LAG Chrudimsko, LAG Ceske Stredohori, LA21 Chrudim and LA21 Litomerice

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There is also a difference in how benefits are realised, and some benefits are only beginning to emerge and will become clearer later.

Research findings. Based on the LA21 managers' answers, it is possible to conclude that LA21 is a functional CLLD tool, generating several intended benefits. A strong focus on social and civic affairs is evident in many implemented activities. The most significant benefits can be seen in the availability of strategic planning of development involving the public, the organisation of a large number of events and campaigns for the public, above-average health care and safety for the citizens of the town and the region, the implementation of projects in the social and environmental spheres, and active education in the field of sustainable development.

Benefits that still have not been achieved or are not significant include economic benefits, benefits in the sphere of cooperation with representatives of the private sector, especially using the potential of industrial enterprises. In this area, it is possible to expect that the situation could improve with increasingly socially responsible corporate behaviour. In terms of the environment, the projects focused on education, sustainable transport and energy are implemented. Based on the answers of the LAGs' managers, it is possible to conclude that they apply the LEADER actively in all its principles. Positive effects include active cooperation with other LAGs on national level and cooperation with key entities in the territories. Both LAGs focus mainly on the implementation of SCLLD via ESIF projects.

Synergistic effects. Based on the analysis of benefit cohesion, synergistic effects of the interconnection of LA21 and the LEADER via LAG are specified, especially in strengthening the coordination of activities in organising events, educational activities and resource use in the area where LA21 and LAG are located. As in Poland (Furmankiewicz et al. 2016), improvements and stronger cooperation have been recognised in the activities of non-profit organisations in the form of extended support of civic services, social services, education, and culture. Other synergistic effects identified in both areas are improved and strengthened coordination in the solving of problems in the region with the availability of social services, the interconnection of transport lines, the catchment areas of schools, the connection of tourist routes and bike paths, recreational and cultural programmes, sports activities, and many other areas.

Although they would appreciate greater public involvement in both municipalities, as is the case abroad (Diaz-Sarachaga 2019; Xavier et al. 2019), they recog-

nised an increase in the number of actors involved and their activities. Lastly, synergistic effects are evident in strategic management in both localities. The interconnection of LA21 and LAG expands the basis for developing a viable long-term strategy in the field of sustainable development from the side of the town/LA21 entity with a top-down approach and through LEADER applying a bottom-up approach. It primarily solves issues chosen by the public without the interference of political decisions by local governments or higher regional self-governing units.

Proposed measures. In light of the analysis and the literature review, it is possible to summarise several recommendations to LAGs and LA21 entities:

- i) linking staff active both in LA21 and the LAG (through coordinators, joint project team members or shared staff), as both initiatives pursue the same objectives and values, solve the same problems and use the same resources;
- ii) combining financial resources available via the LA21 entity and LAG for support in the region (exploitation of local, regional, national, and international financial resources, also asking the private sector for cooperation and financing);
- iii) trying to involve as many diverse entities as possible to achieve a balanced solution to the interests of the private, public, and non-profit sectors; public and non-profits currently have a greater degree of involvement or cooperation than the private sector; using the growing social responsibility of private businesses;
- iv) trying to involve as many diverse (in terms of age and social status) entities/actors as possible to achieve a balanced solution to the interests of all citizens in the region; the level of involvement of these groups is still perceived as being inadequate;
- v) fostering cooperation with the non-profit sector, which offers know-how, staffing, and other capacities and resources for activities in social and environmental areas, education, and raising public awareness;
- vi) strengthening cooperation on the national and international levels between towns involved in LA21, LAGs, and other entities.

CONCLUSION

PA makes an effort to include the concept of sustainable development, among others, to manage municipalities and to establish 'good governance'. CLLD tools, namely LA21 and LEADER, applied globally or within

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Europe, have also spread around the CZ in the last 20 years. This paper assessed, within the case study, the impacts of these tools on particular rural locations and their benefits. A combination of both tools within the two locations resulted in synergistic effects in several areas both in the town and in the region; mainly through empowered cooperation, public, private, and non-profit sector involvement, project financing, co-responsibility of citizens/companies for the condition of the region, the support of education, new business opportunities, and citizens' quality of life and health. The benefit of combining both tools is supporting sustainable development not only from the side of the municipality and its involvement in LA21 with a top-down approach but also through the LEADER approach applying a bottom-up approach. Therefore, it is possible to recommend that PA applies LA21 and LEADER in its practice as tools for improving the quality of PA, development of the region, and the fulfilment of sustainable development. It would be useful to focus on this area in the long-term, analyse the synergistic effects in other locations, and compare the results. A limitation of the research is the low number of high-quality LA21 implementations that qualified for inclusion in the research.

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