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The Creators of a Concept for Small Regional Rural Development

Abstract

The effort of the accession to the European Union and design of SAPARD influenced the history of Hungarian rural development policy at the turn of the millennium. During the process of the practical and theoretical planning of rural development two characteristic lobbies were articulated. One of the main conflicts between them was the question of the small region's position in the development system. In the early phases of planning one discourse community preferred LEADER-type rural development and kept the indispensable formation of the bottom-up system where small regions could be involved at initial level. According to them the 'SAPARD small regions' would work as the LEADER Local Action Groups. The first part of this paper deals with the Hungarian rural development system through the model of the European Union and from the point of view of the micro region's development. That is followed by a presentation of the formation of the small region's plans – which was theoretically the base of the national plan – on the basis of complex research in a sample region. This region is in an excellent geographic position and developing economic conditions were among the best of those 192 small regions which had some concept about rural development. The research focused on the following questions: Which actors were in a key position during planning? Can they be described by categories? What is the connection between the actors and the roles? What kind of communication channel operates the harmonisation and promotion of the interests and opinions? These plans for small regions have now been completed, so the bottom-up organisation processes have started. However, they have not been organically continued. They have not put these plans to the use of either national planning or a local programme. Therefore, most rural researchers, rural policy makers and rural development specialists are sceptical about this subject.

Keywords: EU, pre-accession programme, SAPARD, Hungary, rural development, expert, small region.

In 1999 – in concordance with the SAPARD programme¹ – most of the small regions in Hungary took the opportunity to determine their own development projects. A planning operation was started, supported by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development in those 192 small regions, some of which were more serious than others. This constituted the basis of the national rural development programme.

In Hungary before 1996, when the Regional Development Act came into existence, conceptual rural improvement had not been conducted. Before 1996, Hungary lacked a systematic development project and all problems were dealt with by ad hoc interventions: this meant that a given region was only supported once. Nevertheless, after the development act was codified in 1996, the first nation-wide initiative was set up in 1999.

Firstly, I would like to trace the basic elements of the Hungarian rural development system and the essential points of the Hungarian political discussion, guiding the small regional planning agenda and practice. After that I am going to present one of the most successful small regions in the country, and the circumstances in which the small regional plan regarding this area came out. In order to achieve the purpose of the research – which is the basis of my study – I made a qualitative investigation in the small region of 'Kecskemét and its territory'² which served as a model region. I have conducted 16 structured interviews with mayors, regional and local managers, and experts working in the settlements of this region, like researchers, specialised teachers, agriculturists and stockbreeders. These people were all active in running the small regional SAPARD plan. My research focused on the following questions: which factors have formed and have had an influence on the development of the improvement conception? and: what is the connection between the roles and participants and what kind of communicational channels were used during the representation and harmonisation of opinions?

Since the change of regime in Hungary there have been two major elements in the history of rural development policy: the first is our country's ambition to join the European Union and the second is the SAPARD and its effects. The European Union created a document entitled AGENDA 2000 for countries wishing to join the EU. The SAPARD was concluded at the summit in Berlin in 1999, and the Decree 1268/1999 of Europe Council regulated the operational rules of the programme. The programme had two major goals: to provide financial support for the restructuring process of agriculture and for rural development. Another goal of the SAPARD was to make the mechanisms of the communal supporting system operational. The

¹ Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development.

² The examination was made within the research: 'Rival knowledge of the regional and rural development system' in December 2001 and January 2002.

Union made it possible for the given countries to decide about their intention to invest financial help; this was only determined by earmarked conditions. In this way every country could choose the most suitable measures of the Plan. In the programme, the level of planning which had to support the countries' rural territories was not specified, but according to the decree of Europe Council, the development plan had to be worked out 'at that geographical level, which is the most suitable for national traditions and purposes.' During the change of government in 1998 the Major Department for Rural Development Programmes of the renewed Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development would have liked to coordinate the newborn SAPARD. The Major Department interpreted the mentioned instruction that the plan had to be worked out at small regional level, which would form the basis of the counties' plans. Those nineteen counties – which are at the level of NUTS III in the EU regional statistical nomenclature – are the basis of the seven regions' – at the level NUTS II – development conception, from which – according to this theory – the national plan was made. For the stimulation of the Major Department for Rural Development Programmes the counties' and regions' development plans were started in mid-1998. In March 1999 the Major Department announced a competition to make the small regional programmes operational by 30 April 1999. In this way a nation-wide organising process was started, but because the exact details were unknown, organisation was problematic.

A problem emerged in March 1999, i.e. the meaning of small region rural development was neither clear nor defined. The Regional Development Act of 1996 divided the country into 10 statistical small regions, and due to the quality of ploughlands there was a so-called regional zone listing, but officially they were not part of the SAPARD plan. The Major Department stipulated that the areas should form contiguous territories and should not be self-governing islands which belong nowhere inside a self-made small region. In this way the small regions came into existence along the following principles. The settlements' traditional connections have had a powerful organizing ability, so those settlements formed a self-governing association. Good terms were indispensable. The cultural and geographical equivalence was also significant. According to the plan the 192 SAPARD small regions had to be categorized. Measures for restructuring agriculture were considered for all the regions, but the rural development arrangements were only for the rural regions. In this way every small region had to be determined if it belonged to the category of 'typically rural area' or not. Since there is no definition of rural areas in Hungary, the classification was preceded by research in order to construct a so-called rural index. Research was carried out by the Great Plain Research Institute of CRE HAS³ con-

³ Centre for Regional Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

ducted by Bálint Csatóri. The index is synthetic and different economic, social and environmental dimensions are aggregated. In the end according to this index, those settlements can be named as rural regions where the population is lower than 120 per km². So the density of population index determined the target territories of the rural development arrangements. This caused problems in those settlements, where city or county town could be found, because there were rural settlements in these areas in vain and in this way the domination of the city took the territory in the 'non rural' category. But later the opposite problem arose.

The index was created for regional characterisation but it was later only adopted at settlement level. This step led to distortion because many settlements with small outskirts and essential rural characteristics could not statistically belong to the rural category. So under these circumstances only a few small SAPARD regions formed and the rural development plans were the basis of the national plan. They currently constitute the backbone of the national plan, in theory only, because it was impossible to create plans which would build them together and time was limited. The announcement of a competition for small regional programmes came to light in March 1999 and nation-wide planning was started in June 1999. In this way there was not direct connection between them and the current situation has not changed.

In the early phase of planning two major orientations were separated from each other. The first was the agrarian line with its more significant history of more decades, which would have liked to enter the SAPARD, so they preferred the support of agriculture. The formation of the other group was closely attached to the SAPARD planning. This group, considering itself as rural developers, was anti-capitalist, had an anti-market overview and preferred rural development which was humanitarian and built on local values. The most controversial issue of the two above-mentioned orientations was the question of the small regional development programme. In the early phase of planning the so-called rural developer orientation had a decisive role and they would have liked to build the programme upwards from below, as in the EU LEADER programme. In this system, small regions have the same role as the Local Action Groups in the LEADER. That is why they supported the formation of small regional programmes. With the consolidation of the other group, the significance of the small regional programming declined, because they disagreed about the initiation of small regions. At the end of the national planning process, the only element which remained from the role of small regions was the following. Those beneficiaries, who wanted to be supported by the scope of the rural development measures of the SAPARD, had to dispose of such a project, which fitted into the original small regional rural development conception.

In the beginning of the small regional planning only 30–40 model territories wanted to be chosen, but later every small region with an acceptable application got financial support for its own development programme. Moreover, those small regions, which were not applicants, were also called upon to announce a competition and make a programme, and those self-governments which belonged nowhere, were requested to join a small region. Depending on quality the applications were ranked among 4 categories. The small regions which announced the best competition became members of category 'A', and they were followed by category 'B' and 'C'. Those small regions and self-governments which announced their competitions just after the notice became members of category 'D'. According to the numbers, qualifications of the SAPARD small regions were formed in the following way:

- 69 small regions in category 'A', i.e. 36% of all regions,
- 62 small regions in category 'B', i.e. 33% of all regions,
- 44 small regions in category 'C', i.e. 23% of all regions and
- 9 small regions in category 'D', i.e. 5% of all regions.

6 small regions did not announce their competition despite the notice. After the listing category 'A' started dealing with the scope of the so-called preparation training, in which – apart from some basic knowledge about the EU and managerial training – concrete rural development themes were put on the agenda.⁴

The course of making the SAPARD small regional programme from announcing the competition to making the programme:⁵

<p>1. Filling in the competition forms Assessment of the competition Classification into categories 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D'</p> <p>2. Making the strategic programme Report progress Monitoring Making the strategic programme Monitoring</p> <p>3. Making the operative programme Making project plans Monitoring</p>

⁴ During the preparation training the following themes were discussed: EU rural development policy, Common Agrarian Policy, project management, the methodology of EU strategic programming, the EU and the Hungarian data bases, the improvement of the community, tourism, the processing of local products, local culture and rural development, co-operatives and consultations, regional marketing, utilisation of the landed estate and forestation, village renewing, alternative agricultural and environmental protection.

⁵ Resource: Tibor Farkas: 'SAPARD kistérségek' In: *Tér és társadalom*, 2000. Vol. 14, No. 2–3, p. 213.

To sum up: it can be said that the rural communities reacted – sometimes without the necessary thorough background – decisively and fast to the SAPARD competition system. Those small regions which started their organising activity separately from the SAPARD were in a better position. These small regions were mostly in the more developed territories.

The small region of Kecskemét was one of those small regions with the best results in category 'A'. It has been significant in the development of this region that apart from the five biggest rural cities of Hungary after the collapse of the regime it has been developing as dynamically as Székesfehérvár. The people of Kecskemét whose profession is connected with rural development have an optimistic attitude. On the one hand, the reason is the geographical and economic condition as it is on the line which links Szeged and the southern countries to our capital and it can easily be approached by motorway. And it can also give a boost to the economy because Kecskemét is the most favourably situated city in the whole region. It is also important that Kecskemét has an institute of higher education.

The fact that the Great Plain Research Institute of the Centre for Regional Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences is in Kecskemét, helped to organise the small region. This institute was responsible for the professional arrangement of the programme. The researchers by SWOT analysis facilitated the implementation of the project. During the exploration of circumstances, the SWOT analysis revealed the possibilities, especially bee-keeping, distillation of brandy, viniculture or poultry farming. In this way, in my opinion, that professional control was indispensable to make the plan work so comprehensively and at the highest possible level.

During the SAPARD formation the regional strategic and operative programme became efficient. The precise work carried out by experts made it possible to keep contact with local institutions, partners and other participants. This is proved by the fact that after the training other forums and meetings were organised by local management, this time for local inhabitants. At these events local participants took the opportunity to express their views about the work in preparation. These views were recorded and other forums were organised to collect further constructive ideas. Planning the programme this way, the local residents took an active part and their contributions were taken into account. Coordination was made by the major organiser of the programme who was also the manager of the small region.. These so-called regional managers work, on the one hand, on behalf of the small region's self- government situated in the centre (Kecskemét) and on the other on behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development's authority. If they work efficiently they can be a very important channel between the ministry and the small region. The mayors and developers of the settlements liaise between the people responsible for professionalism

and coordination and the local participants. Every initiative coming from the level of small regions was organised with their help, e.g. forums of the local residents.

The professional coordinator of the programming was the settlement and regional development economist of the research institute in the centre of the model region, which was a consistent professional advantage compared with other small regions. In my opinion, his role was significant in three aspects. He was a leader who approached the work from the outside and had a broad view, he had connections with all the experts and he had decisive competence in unsettled questions and knew the methodology of the planning process. This professional leader also had the role of evaluating the situation which is very important for appraising and analysing external conditions. The third relevant aspect was the initiative of the responsible official. The methodology of the programme making had two major roles: the creation of conditions for the projects from the professional point of view and the creation of projects from the point of view of the local participants. It is not rare that the local participants do not have the information which would be necessary to make plans. In such cases it is important to increase the creativity of the inhabitants by raising good initiatives, models, examples and ideas, and in this way it can happen that not only the most general strategic solutions come to light. The responsible official is the controller and guard of the professional success of the programme. So the exploration of the logical relation of the programme and making subsequent corrections is also the responsibility of the responsible official.

The external experts were only in contact with the responsible official, present mostly for evaluating the situation. These experts who had an agrarian background often solved partial tasks during the SAPARD planning. Although they were responsible officials, controlling the lower sub-programmes or professional projects, they did not have any connection or information about the other section of programme making. So the role of these experts was only important as a basis for programme making.

There was a group dealing with rural problems, called rural development experts. These people had generally graduated in the last decade and their professional knowledge was mostly theoretical – built on a theoretical approach, schemes, improving models from the EU. The regional manager whose responsibility and prestige were as significant as those of the professional coordinator liaised between the Ministry and the small region, and he was the major organiser of the participants and events making the programme. On the one hand, it is important that he has been attached to the given region as a private man and as an expert. On the other,

the experience in the results, which depends mostly on time, is also an important part of successful activity. This can be the basis for making and realising a strategy which is diverse, necessary for the development of the region and centrally supported. And lastly, the team working with the manager can be an important condition for success, being experienced, flexible and having considerable local knowledge. In addition, adequate *specialised education* and a *stable financial base* are essential elements. This is generally the biggest obstacle to improvement. After presenting these criteria I can say that in the examined small region the regional manager was a participant of the local specialised education. He is a local resident and in this way his local knowledge and expertise are also excellent. The region itself is in a very good position. The *l o c a l m a n a g e r s* can be characterised by the same features as the regional manager yet they work at settlement level. The managerial team's attitude was opposed to the SAPARD: they regarded the whole programme and the whole rural development system as a failure. They are more disappointed than any other group of participants because the SAPARD programme has not yet started.

The fourth dominant team participating in the programme is the group of *m a y o r s*. All of those interviewed have local interests and they are attached to the given settlement from birth. They usually have a self-government past: perhaps they were not always mayors, but worked as employees of the self-government. These people see the whole programme from another point of view. For them, the programme is a possibility among others, whose exercise is to help operating the settlement, but this could not be realised for external reasons. So the starting point for them is the development of the settlement and the SAPARD can only appear as a potential resource. In their opinion people are disappointed, but the initiative was useful, because it managed to start an organising and thinking process at the lowest level. To summarise, it can be said, that the examined small region possessed adequate human resources: thorough professional control, an efficient organisational and managerial team and a cooperative local community. They think their work is very useful, despite the fact that the programme did not start. If not concretely in this programme, but they have used the collected materials since then. In spite of this they are offended and they think that the higher political leading is responsible for not starting the programme. According to their opinion, it is proved that the rural areas can be developed, moved and people are ready to act.

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