Cogent Social Sciences

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/oass20

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To cite this article: Adél Veselicz, Ondřej Konečný, János Pénzes & Csaba Patkós (2025) Evaluating LEADER program support for local projects: insights from the Czech Republic and Hungary (2007–2013), Cogent Social Sciences, 11:1, 2456501, DOI: 10.1080/23311886.2025.2456501

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2025.2456501

Published online: 27 Jan 2025.

COGENT SOCIAL SCIENCES
2025, VOL. 11, NO. 1, 2456501
https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2025.2456501

SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Evaluating LEADER program support for local projects: insights from the Czech Republic and Hungary (2007–2013)

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ABSTRACT

The rural areas of the European Union are very multidimensiona, they have different social and economic problems. The LEADER programme tries to reflect on these issues and help rural areas by giving locals the ability to develop their environment according to their needs. Local action groups (LAGs) are responsible for the distribution of funds. In the course of our research activity, we wanted to compare the distribution of resources of the Czech and Hungarian LEADER LAGs in the 2007–2013 period. We collected data from LEADER LAGs, such as the amount of LEADER funds allocated to settlements, the unemployment rate of each LAGs, per capita income, population density and the number of member settlements. Using the Gini-index, we calculated the resource distribution inequality of the LAGs and then correlation calculations were performed using the Gini-index and the other socio-economic indicators. With the aim of discovering whether the examined indicators have an effect on the distribution of resources within the LAGs. Our study shows no stronk link between the investigated indicators and the LEADER fund distribution. We concluded that, the distribution of LEADER funds among settlements can be influenced by other socio-economic factors.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 7 March 2024
Revised 7 October 2024
Accepted 14 January 2025

KEYWORDS
Czech Republic; Hungary; LEADER; local projects; rural development; spatial justice; territorial inequality

SUBJECTS
Human Geography; Sociology; Statistics for Social Sciences; European Union Politics

Introduction

Over the past three decades, the Eastern Central European countryside has undergone significant transformations stemming from the regime change that took place after 1990. These transformative processes have unveiled socio-economic disparities, shedding light on the pronounced social, cultural, and economic variations between rural areas. Presently, these inequalities persist, and it can be argued that they have even intensified. In essence, certain regions find themselves in more favourable circumstances, while others, despite their earnest endeavours, have struggled to substantially improve their conditions (Perlín et al., 2010; Tagai et al., 2019; Uzzoli & Szilágyi, 2013).

The European Union detected these challenges and, from the early 1990s, a new participatory rural development method, known as the LEADER programme, was created as a response (Kovách, 2000; Ray, 2000). The recognition has grown that addressing the challenges faced by underdeveloped regions requires more than just centrally controlled, top-down development. The role of locality and local communities is equally crucial in tackling these issues. Therefore, the approach that prioritizes local initiatives (bottom-up development) has become more and more powerful (Furmankiewicz et al., 2010; Konečný, 2019).

Since the initiation of the LEADER program, a vast array of general studies, case studies, and reports on best practices have been published, focusing on the examination of the LEADER approach. The literature encompasses investigations into the implementation of the LEADER program across various countries; works demonstrating LEADER as a decentralisation tool for rural development (Aubert et al., 2022;

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Kovács et al., 2011), representing a social innovation (Dax et al., 2016; Pollermann et al., 2013) or a model of institutional transfer (Chevalier et al., 2017) and ensuring its programmatic and financial security (Csurgó & Kovách, 2016; Volk & Bojnec, 2014). Among other things, authors write critical evaluations of the LEADER programme (Furmankiewicz et al., 2010; Navarro et al., 2016b). Experts deal with the general characterization, description, and analysis of the programme with the analysis of local action groups (LAG) as a main implementation body of LEADER (Cejudo et al., 2022; Kovács-Katona et al., 2006; Ray, 2000).

The distribution of support for projects from EU funds, which is the basic activity of local action groups, has not escaped the authors' attention (Caňete et al., 2018; Masot & Alonso, 2017). At the same time, studies have been carried out on selected territorial features where the projects are concentrated (primarily the rurality of the area) (Cejudo et al., 2022; Chevalier et al., 2017; Masot & Alonso, 2017; Navarro et al., 2016a). Nevertheless, the literature to date has not focused much on the spatial relationships within this support for local projects by LAGs, particularly in terms of the evenness of the distribution of support and its relationship to the characteristics of the territory. We see the contribution of such oriented research to the current state of knowledge as important because the participatory rural development approach involves the engagement of local communities and stakeholders in the decision-making process. This allows for a better understanding of the specific local needs, challenges, and opportunities. By incorporating local knowledge, the allocation of support can be more tailored and more responsive to the unique circumstances of the region, potentially leading to a more even distribution of resources (Biczkowski, 2020; Furmankiewicz et al., 2021). This approach has the potential to contribute to a spatially more even allocation of support, but its effectiveness in achieving this outcome can vary depending on several factors. Therefore, we see the potential to fulfil the gap identified by Furmankiewicz et al., 2021 (p. 8): 'a geographical study taking into account the socio-economic contexts of areas in which projects are funded, would shed light on how equitable the distribution of LEADER funding is territorial'.

Additionally, a participatory approach aims to empower the local community. By including marginalized or disadvantaged communities in the process, there is a greater likelihood that spatial disparities will be addressed and inequalities reduced (Moseley, 2003; Nicholls et al., 2013). This can result in a more equitable allocation of support that takes into account the diverse spatial contexts and ensures that resources are not disproportionately concentrated in certain regions. Finally, these programs promote transparency and accountability in the allocation of support (Bamberger, 1987). By involving stakeholders in the decision-making process, there is increased scrutiny and oversight of resource allocation decisions. This can help mitigate based on and favouritism, ensuring that support is allocated on the basis of objective criteria and the identified needs of different spatial areas. The uneven distribution of projects may cause discrepancies in the territory (Furmankiewicz et al., 2021), but it may also reflect the absorption capacity of the territory. On the basis of these arguments, we believe that our study can help to reveal to what extent LEADER support has been channelled evenly across the territory while respecting the geographical char-acteristics of the territory.

We operationalize our research at the LAG level because, on one hand, they serve as central coordination centers for local development initiatives, as highlighted by Bakos and Khademi-Vidra (2019). However, their administrative role is equally significant, as emphasized by Brosei (2011) and Konečný et al. (2020). The provision of financial support is directly linked to their 'administrative function', but it is also indirectly influenced by their role in driving local development initiatives (Pollermann et al., 2013). As LAGs are highly diverse areas, some of which have elements of peripheral areas, while others are highly developed areas, we ask how this different socio-economic context has influenced the spatial pattern of support to local projects. Place-based approaches, like the LEADER can support the prevailing spatial justice, namely the adequate geographical distribution of social benefits (Madanipour et al., 2022; Shucksmith et al., 2021). The concept is usually used in the context of urban development (Weckroth et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2020) however it is partly mentioned in case studies, related to rural regions too (Nordberg, 2020; Woods et al., 2019).

Although some studies have compared regions from other states (Dax et al., 2016; Lacquement et al., 2020), previous research lacks a comprehensive analysis encompassing an entire member state, and there are no examples of international comparisons at national levels in analysed topic.

The main aim of the article is to find out the spatial distribution (how evenly or unevenly the individual LAGs are distributed) of the LEADER resources among their member municipalities. Furthermore, the objective is to identify any quasi-objective socio-economic factors that may underlie the observed distribution patterns. As Caňete et al. (2018) state, the implementation of the LEADER initiative in the EU should be examined within the context of social, economic, territorial, and theoretical factors. We connected our study with the implementation of the LEADER program in the Czech Republic and Hungary (Figure 1) between 2007 and 2013. Both countries are part of the group of post-socialist states that entered the European Union in 2004. However, it is important to note that national and local characteristics can exert influence on the process of the implementation of the LEADER program as their national frameworks and socioeconomic geography are different. To meet this objective, the distribution of support for local projects was related to selected socio-economic factors of the LAGs, namely population density, income, and unemployment. Similar socio-economic indicators were used by Caňete et al. (2018) in their analyses concerning the LEADER implementation of Andalusia.

The Czech Republic is a country located in East-Central Europe, bordered by Germany, Poland, Austria, and Slovakia. The Czech Republic is a country with an area of 78,860 km^2 and a population of 10.2 million (as of 2007). Out of its total area, only 39% lies below 400 meters above sea level. In the European

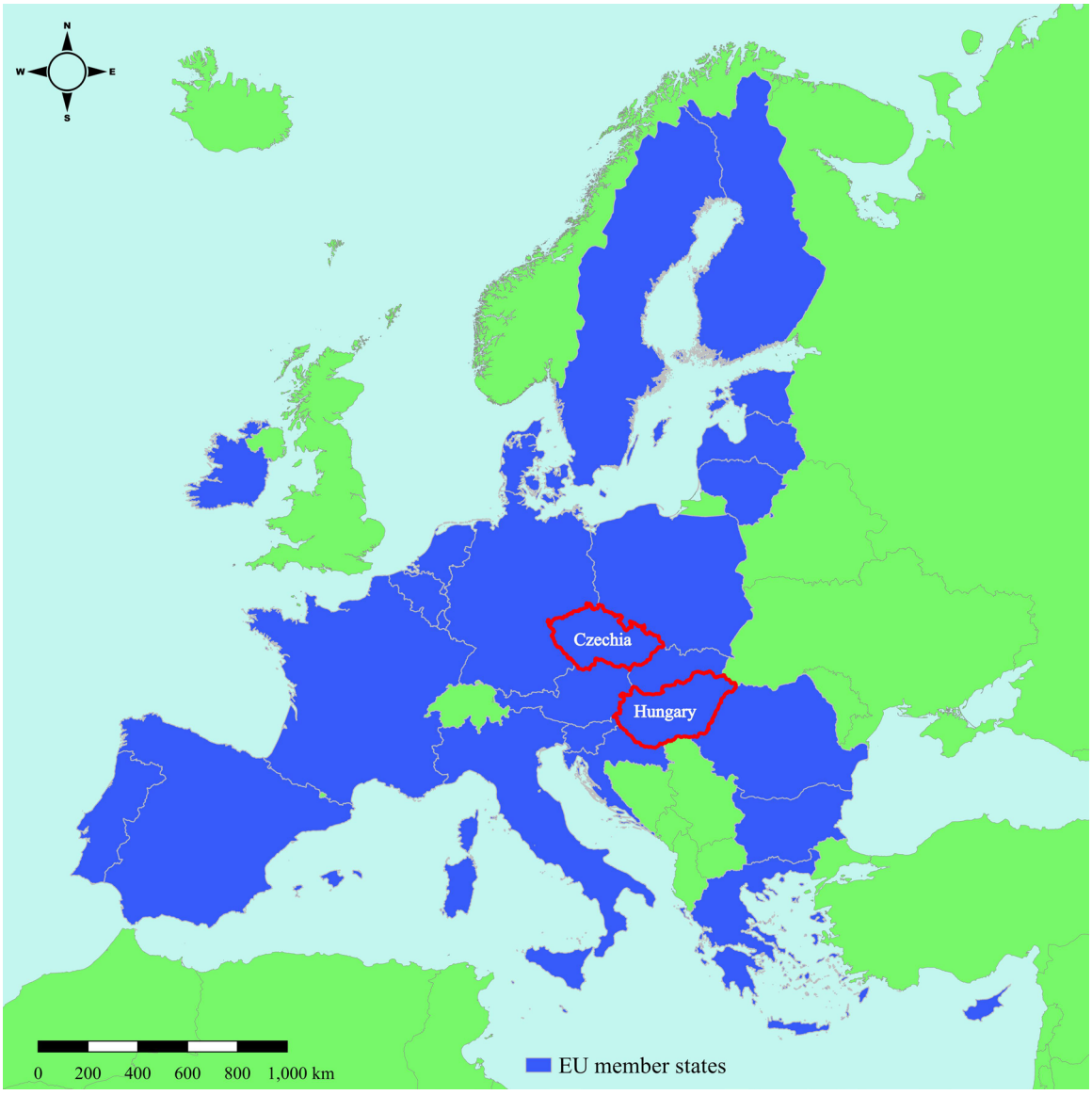

Figure 1. Location of the Czech Republic and Hungary. Source: the authors.

context, it has the character of mountainous and foothill regions. The majority of the country's population lives in rural areas. A total of 9,050,006 people live in rural regions, making up 88.6% of the Czech population, and they cover 78,370 km^2, which accounts for 99.4% of the territory of the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic has 4,264 hectares of agricultural land. On average, there are 0.42 hectares of agricultural land per inhabitant, of which 0.3 hectares is arable land. This is approximately in line with the European average. Half of the land is located in less-favored areas (RDP of the Czech Republic). During the 200–-2013 period, the total size of LAG areas in the Czech Republic was 46,211 km^2, encompassing a population of 3,441,000 people (http 1).

Hungary is also located in East-Central Europe, bordered by Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Austria. Hungary has an area of 93,000 km^2 and a population of 10,077,000 (in 2006). 87% of its territory is classified as rural. 96% of its municipalities are considered rural, and 47% of the population lives in these areas. The conditions for agricultural production (soil quality, climate, and topography) are favorable even by international comparison. Of Hungary's total area (9.3 million hectares), 83% is suitable for various agricultural and forestry uses, depending on soil fertility, making arable land one of the country's most important resources and a fundamental factor in production. In 2004 and 2005, 63% of Hungary's total area was used for agricultural purposes (RDP of Hungary, 2007–2013). During the 2007–2013 period in Hungary, the total size of the LAG area was 82,772 km^2, and the total population in LAG areas was 4,510,000 (http 1).

Our inspiration is partly based on the optimization model (priority municipalities to receive aid for rural development) of Alonso and Masot (2022), who used selected indicators (smaller population, low demographic growth, low birth rate, high mortality rate, high aging population, low productivity index, high unemployment rates, low accessibility to urban centres) to define areas deserving of targeted LEADER support.

Population density plays a relevant role in the determination of rurality according to the EU and national definitions that are used by development policies. It can influence the success of different participatory development methods (Bebbington & Perreault, 1999; Krishna, 2002; Mosse, 2006; Pretty, 1995). The relevance of social capital in the success of participatory development initiatives and about access to resources in sparsely and densely populated rural areas is noted by Cleaver (2005). While a higher population density can present challenges, it can also offer advantages for participatory development. Densely populated areas may have a more diverse skill base, greater potential for social entrepreneurship, and a higher capacity for collective action, which can enhance the effectiveness of participatory approaches.

The level of socio-economic development might also affect patterns of support distribution. High unemployment rates can lead to a sense of disillusionment and apathy within a community. Participation in development activities may be affected if community members lack motivation and do not see tangible benefits. For this reason, we also examined the connection between the unemployment rate, income, and distribution patterns (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Hickey & Mohan, 2009; Mosse, 2005; Narayan & Petesch, 2002).

So far, there has been no study that would make an international comparison in terms of resource distribution. Therefore, we consider our article to fill a gap in this area.

According to the literature, more experienced and institutionalized local action groups can function more inclusively, integrating both less-developed areas and social groups (Lukesch, 2007). Starting from Lukesch's theory, we assumed that the degree of institutionalization can be seen in LAGs practices for distributing support, with more experienced, better-embedded groups having a more even distribution practice.

The hypotheses of our research are as follows:

1. There is a statistically significant correlation between the number of member settlements in a LAG and the evenness of financial support distribution.
2. Socio-economic indicators affect the inequality of resource distribution:
3. Higher population density within LAGs is positively correlated with a more even distribution of financial resources.
4. There is a negative correlation between the unemployment rate in a LAG's region and the evenness of resource distribution.

5. Higher per capita income in LAG regions is positively correlated with a more even distribution of financial resources.
6. The length of time a LAG has been active is positively correlated with the evenness of resource distribution.

Theoretical framework: geography of LAGs local project support

Prior to the turn of the millennium, as the LEADER program was initiated, several researchers with expertise in rural development held a highly positive outlook, expressing optimism and harboring high expectations for the program's future. Among Hungarian authors, Kovách (2000) spoke positively about LEADER's potential, saying in 2000 that 'LEADER may become the defining principle and practice of European rural development policy'. Buller (2000) pointed out that the LEADER program was a new trend in rural development that was based on the everyday life of the rural population, as it was based on local experiences, identities, and actions. The significance of the local sub-system in rural development has been increasingly acknowledged within the EU support policy. This recognition is evident in the consistent expansion of the role and resources allocated to the LEADER program, which is firmly grounded in the principles of local community-based development planning (Konečný, 2019; Varga, 2012).

Studies show that although LAGs should play many different roles in the development of the territory, the key role seems to be the redistribution of EU funds to the territory of the group (Marquardt et al., 2012; Svobodová, 2015). Therefore, a number of studies addressing the implementation of the LEADER method have focused on understanding which measures were crucial for local actors, i.e. which were directed to the territory to the greatest extent (Arabatzis et al., 2010; Chmieliński et al., 2018; Hudečková & Lošťák, 2008; Kah et al., 2023). The directing of subsidies by LAGs is significantly influenced by the setting of the policy framework and overall support possibilities (Konečný et al., 2021). In 2007–2013, measures focused on infrastructure and agriculture were central (Navarro et al., 2016a; Svobodová, 2015). The authors also look for other factors that influence the application of measures or support for local projects, such as the information capacity of potential applicants (Dax et al., 2016; Furmankiewicz et al., 2010; Potočnik Slavič, 2022) or the role of informal decision-making within the group (Furmankiewicz et al., 2021; Volk & Bojnec, 2014).

Furmankiewicz et al. (2021) describe unwritten but widespread rules favouring the allocation of funding proportionately and fairly across territories rather than on the basis of project application scores.

The financial aid, provided by the LEADER program could theoretically decrease the existing disparities in opportunities and resources between different areas, thus supporting spatial justice through promoting collaborative relationships between regions (Brooks et al. 2019).

Concerning spatial justice, different scholars (Marcuse, 2010; Shucksmith et al., 2021; Soja, 2011) distinguish the procedural type, which is about the uneven spread of power relations (e.g. process) and the distributive justice, related to the spread of outcomes and resources.

The view of the distribution of support for local LEADER projects is thus presented either in terms of the representation of individual groups of applicants or through a geographical lens. Asymmetry of power in institutions and territory may have implications for the distribution of support within the LAG territory. Shucksmith (2000) studied the UK's LEADER program. In 2000, he published a work that established that the program put those who already had 'power' in a more advantageous position. He also drew attention to the fact that this could lead to the local 'elite' completely ascribing the initiative to themselves. The strength of individual LAG partners and their role within the group may also influence the allocation of resources by the LAG (Cejudo et al., 2022; Navarro et al., 2016a). Yet, for post-socialist countries, it is evident that elected representatives of municipalities hold an important position (Biczkowski, 2020; Chevalier et al., 2017; Furmankiewicz et al., 2010; Marquardt et al., 2012; Maurel, 2008; Volk & Bojnec, 2014). Marginalized groups would be less able and less likely to participate or get involved in the program unless significant attention was paid to support them (Kovács et al., 2011). Asymmetry of power may have implications for the distribution of support within the LAG territory. Shucksmith (2000) showed that participation aimed at bringing marginalized groups into small rural

communities ended up benefiting local elites. Only these local and experienced elites were able to mobilize their networks and obtain funding in a short period because they had the skills to act. Lowe et al. (1998) drew attention to the dangers of an approach to rural development that was based on community participation, stressing that, instead of the originally intended effective use of resources, this approach often strengthened the influence of local authorities or resulted in local apathy (Nemes, 2005).

In the literature, the geographical perspective of LEADER implementation at the local or regional level is used in two basic approaches. Firstly, it is used to capture the impact of LEADER in the territory (Aubert et al., 2022; Cañete et al., 2018; Olar & Jitea, 2021; Potočnik Slavič, 2022), secondly to understand the 'link' between support for local projects and the geographical characteristics of the territory (Chevalier et al., 2017; Masot and Alonso 2017; Navarro et al., 2016a; Průša et al., 2022; Veselicz et al., 2022).

In terms of the instrument's impact on rural development, according to Lukesch (2007), a more institutionalized, more socially-embedded LAG can, be more territorially integrated - being closer to the 'sustainability stage' and contribute to the balanced development of the territory. According to Olar and Jitea (2021), more experienced LAGs can create a more balanced territorial development (Olar & Jitea, 2021), although Cañete et al. (2018) show uneven development trends in the case of Andalusia. The results of Aubert et al. (2022) suggest that the effect of LEADER was significantly positive on net migration and population growth rate but limited in terms of employment at the municipal level.

Using a geographical perspective capturing the spatial relationships of LEADER distribution and the characteristics of the areas where local projects are implemented, some studies have noted the geographical characteristics of the locations where this support is directed (Chevalier et al., 2017; Navarro et al., 2016a; Průša et al., 2022). However, previous studies have not primarily addressed the spatial distribution of support in terms of the evenness and equitability of its distribution (Opria et al., 2021; Veselicz et al., 2022). Masot and Alonso (2017) and Cañete et al. (2018), show that LAG support was primarily directed to areas that are economically stable. Research has shown that settlements make different uses of the opportunities arising from the regulatory background and that this is linked to their characteristics, including their size, capabilities, and local government management (Mezei, 2006). Most of the more active and successful examples of implementation of project support are in the larger cities, and settlements with smaller populations are often characterized by a lack of development initiatives. Alonso and Masot (2022) describe the positive discrimination of towns and economically strong municipalities in the implementation of LEADER and therefore propose an optimal localization model of LEADER investments in Extremadura that takes into account the geographical features of socio-economically weak rural areas. Also, Kulcsár (2020) showed that subsidies, new ideas, and initiatives are predominantly implemented in rural areas that already are developed. On the other hand, Průša et al. (2022), using the specific example of support to organic farmers through LEADER, showed that the support is more concentrated in less developed rural areas. Cejudo et al. (2022) described that we can identify the differences according to the level of peripherality, when private sector investors tend to invest in peri-urban spaces, while public bodies, and especially local councils, invest in remote rural areas. On the Polish experience of implementing the LEADER approach Biczkowski (2020) indicates that the structure of implemented projects is related to the resources of individual regions.

Opria et al. (2021) highlighted how the LEADER program in Romania accentuated pre-existing disparities between rural communities due to the fictitious involvement of the local community in fund allocation decisions and excessive intervention by public authorities. This emphasizes a critical issue where the purported community involvement may not always translate into an equitable distribution of resources, potentially exacerbating territorial inequalities (Veselicz et al., 2022). The different findings on the spatial location of LEADER-supported projects in different countries show the importance of setting the framework by national authorities. Therefore, applying comparisons in selected countries may offer an expanding interpretation of the results captured in the case studies.

According to these examples, the contribution of the LEADER aid to the intraregional spatial justice of local action groups is controversial. As the results of the former literature examples are based on case studies, it is worth making a systematic analysis comparing the data of two EU member states.

Space for implementation of LEADER in the Czech Republic and Hungary

National specificities, whether geographic or institutional, can significantly influence the LAG's approach to supporting local projects and thus the spatial pattern (Dvořáková Lišková et al., 2019; Patkós, 2018). While Central and Eastern European countries share certain common characteristics, it is important to recognize that their development paths also exhibit significant national differences (Khademi-Vidra, 2014; Turnock, 2003). Both the Czech Republic and Hungary share the commonality that the official implementation of the LEADER method took place after they joined the European Union in 2004. However, before EU accession, the two countries already had a program aimed at decentralized rural development. In the Czech Republic, for example, the Programme of Rural Restoration was implemented between 2001 and 2003 with the support of the EU's SAPARD fund. Until 2007, almost 140 LAGs were established, but only 10 of them received EU funding (totaling around €6.4 million) from the agricultural support fund under the Czech Rural Development Operational Programme. These local communities largely continued their activities in 2007–2013 (Konečný et al., 2020). In Hungary, there were two programs to prepare rural actors for the application of the LEADER approach in Hungary. On the one hand Agricultural and Rural Development Micro-Regional Programmes (1999–2002) and on the other hand Rural Development Target Programme LEADER Pilot Programme (2001–2004).

Both countries completed their first LEADER cycle during the period evaluated in the article.

The definitions of rurality in the Czech Republic and Hungary, as well as the corresponding development trajectory of their rural areas, exhibit certain similarities, but it is important to acknowledge that there are also notable differences between the two countries. In Hungary, after EU integration, under the New Hungary Rural Development Programme (ÚMVP), in force between 2007 and 2013, areas with a population density of less than 120 people/km^2 or settlements with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants could be considered rural (FVM, 2007). In the Czech Republic, the statistical definition of a rural settlement is often linked to a population of 2,000–3000 (Maríkova, 2007). The 2007–2013 RDP in the Czech Republic followed the traditional definition of focusing on villages with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants, but mostly those with fewer than 500 inhabitants.

In the period 2007–2013, the exact definition of rurality was partly left to the competence of the Member States. This specific national operationalization in the two countries developed as follows:

1. In the Czech Republic, municipalities with fewer than 25,000 inhabitants could become LAG members (MINISTERSTVO ZIEMEDELSTVI CESKE REPUBLIKY, 2008).
2. In Hungary, municipalities with a population of fewer than 10,000 inhabitants or with a population density below 120 people/km^2 could join (Patkós, 2013).

Regarding the period 2007–2013, Regulation 1698/2005 provided the framework for the implementation system of the program, but individual Member States were allowed to adapt the system to their specific characteristics. In the Czech Republic, LAGs could only implement rural development measures narrowly in line with Regulation 1698/2005, whereas in most EU Member States LAGs could implement a wider spectrum of measures. Most LAGs opted for the 'single-measure fiche' technique and used the activity and cost types of the main measure. Supported LAGs were selected in two rounds and received EU funding, but local organizations that did not receive EU support could get funding from the domestic budget (http 2). The details of the operation of LEADER in Hungary are set out in Regulation No 122/2009 of 17 December 2009 – the FVM Regulation on the detailed conditions for granting support from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development for the implementation of the LEADER chapter of Local Rural Development Strategies. Compared to the Czech Republic, a clear Hungarian strategy was to integrate as many rural areas as possible into the LEADER program, partly by extending the previous LEADER+ LAGs, but partly through newly established communities.

Data and methods

The main database for our research comprised all 'Axis 4 RDP projects implemented in the Czech Republic and Hungary between 2007 and 2013 through local action groups. During our research, we worked with all supported Hungarian (96 LAGs) and Czech local action groups (114). The calculation of the inequality

of resources allocated to the implementation of local development strategies was carried out. We collected and processed the data of all action groups without selecting them.

In order to uncover contexts, we used the data on the unemployment rates and income of residents of the two countries for the planning period under examination were also collected. The source for the income data sets was the Czech Ministry of Finance.[1] and the Hungarian National Tax and Customs Administration (NAV)[2] Databases. The data on registered unemployment were collected from the database of the Czech Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MPSV)[3] and the National Regional Development and Spatial Planning Information System (TeIR)[4]. The process of the research is shown in Figure 2.

According to the definitions used by the EU and national development policies, population density plays a significant role in determining rurality. It can influence the success of various participatory development approaches (Bebbington & Perreault, 1999; Krishna, 2002; Mosse, 2006; Pretty, 1995). Several authors highlight the importance of social capital in the success of participatory development initiatives (Póla, 2019) and access to resources in sparsely and densely populated rural areas (Cleaver, 2005). While higher population density may pose challenges, it can also offer advantages for participatory development. Densely populated areas may have a more diverse skill base, greater social and entrepreneurial potential, and a higher capacity for collective action, all of which can enhance the effectiveness of participatory approaches.

Communities with higher income levels and lower unemployment rates are economically more developed. This results in a stronger infrastructural and economic background, along with higher education levels and financial resources, which can aid in the planning and implementation of grant projects. Communities with better financial and investment resources are more capable of developing projects that align with the LEADER program's goals and criteria, giving them a competitive advantage in resource allocation.

We believe that unemployment and income data provide an adequate indication of the economic strength of rural settlements, which is why we chose these indicators and compared them with the allocated LEADER resources, to see what kind of relationship emerges.

The unemployment and income data were compared with the resource distribution inequalities of the local action groups (Gini index), as well as with other data of the LAGs (number of member settlements, number of years of operation, population density).

The Gini coefficient is often used in studies on social and economic inequalities and is also often applied to express territorial inequalities (Coulter, 1989). The Gini method (and its decomposed specification) is an important tool for detecting inequalities in the field of rural development (Efremova et al., 2017), as well as in agricultural incomes or rural development resources (Bojnec & Fertő, 2020; Rubén et al., 2020). For this reason, the weighted Gini calculation was included in the current analysis.

Spatial inequalities in financial resources should be analysed in relation to the distribution of the population (in the current case, this indicator expresses the differences between territorial units), and therefore the per capita values of the distributed LEADER resources were included in the weighted Gini

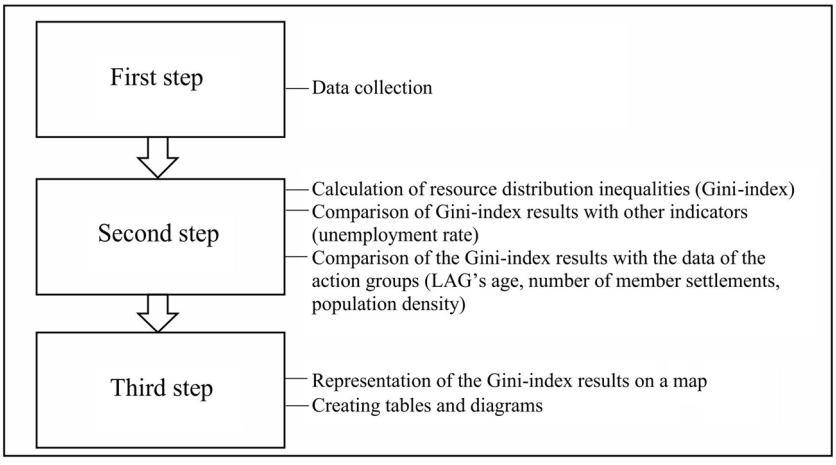

Figure 2. The process of our research. Source: the authors.

Table 1. Data used during the research. Source: the authors.

	Czech Republic	*Hungary*
Data	*Unit of measure*	*Unit of measure*
LEADER resources in 2007–2013	Czech koruna (CZK)	Hungarian Forint (HUF)
Population eligible for support	number of people	number of people
Unemployment rate	percent (%)	percent (%)
Per capita income	Czech Koruna (CZK)	Hungarian Forint (HUF)
Population density	people/km^2	people/km^2

calculation. The weighted Gini coefficient was calculated for the LAGs using the following formula (Langel & Tillé, 2013; Major & Nemes Nagy, 1999):

$$G_w = \frac{1}{2\overline{\overline{y}}_w} \sum\sum \frac{f_i f_j}{\left(\Sigma_i f_i\right)^2} \left| y_{i-} y_j \right|$$

where y_i and y_j express the financial resources per capita in the territorial units, $\bar{y}_w$ is the weighted average value of the financial resource per capita in the given LAG, and f_i and f_j are the populations in the territorial units (LAU 2 settlements).

We performed Pearson's linear correlation calculation between the Gini-index values and the chosen other indicators (The variables of the correlation calculation: unemployment rate, income, number of settlements, density values, resource distribution inequality).

The correlation calculation is the relationship between random variables (signal numbers, data) and the procedure for determining its tightness. The essence and decisive step of the correlation calculation is a concise characterization of the closeness of a relationship with an indicator, i.e. the correlation calculating the coefficient value (Nemes, 2005). Its value ranges between −1 and +1. If the value is negative, the two data series show co-movement in the opposite direction between, and in the case of a positive value, one-way co-movement. 0 or very close to its values do not show that there is no relationship between the two characteristics, but that there is no linear relationship.

The units of measurement for the data collected during the research and subsequently used can be found in the table below (Table 1).

Results: inequality according to the Gini index

Among the three territorial inequality calculations, the results for the calculations of the Gini coefficient are displayed on maps to show how the resources were distributed for each LAG (Figure 3). First, it is apparent that in Hungary a higher proportion of settlements participated in the LEADER programme than in the Czech Republic, because of national political decisions. Secondly, it can be seen that the distribution of LEADER financial support for local projects is diverse in both countries.

We now present the results of our research aiming to find socio-economic and institutional causes hiding behind these distribution patterns. In the course of our research, we found out which settlements received LEADER funds in the period 2007–2013, and which municipality did not benefit from this type of funding at all. Furthermore, through the inequality calculations, we were able to calculate how unequally the local action groups of the two countries distributed the LEADER resources between their settlements.

The Gini index values range widely in both countries, in the Czech Republic the lowest Gini index value is 0.17, which was achieved by MAS Valašsko - Horní Vsacko. In Hungary, the lowest Gini index value is 0.23, which the Dél-Mátra Közhasznú Egyesület achieved. In the Czech Republic, the highest inequality value is 0.83, reported by MAS Rakovnicko, while the highest Gini index value in Hungary is 0.91, this high inequality was produced by the Lower Tisza Rural Development Association. In the Czech Republic, most local action groups can be classified in the Gini index categories between 0.45–0.54 and 0.55–0.64, 28–28 in both categories. In Hungary, most LAGs can be classified in the Gini index category between 0.55–0.64, 34 in number (Table 2). The results show substantial differences in the spatial distribution of supported projects between the two countries compared. In the

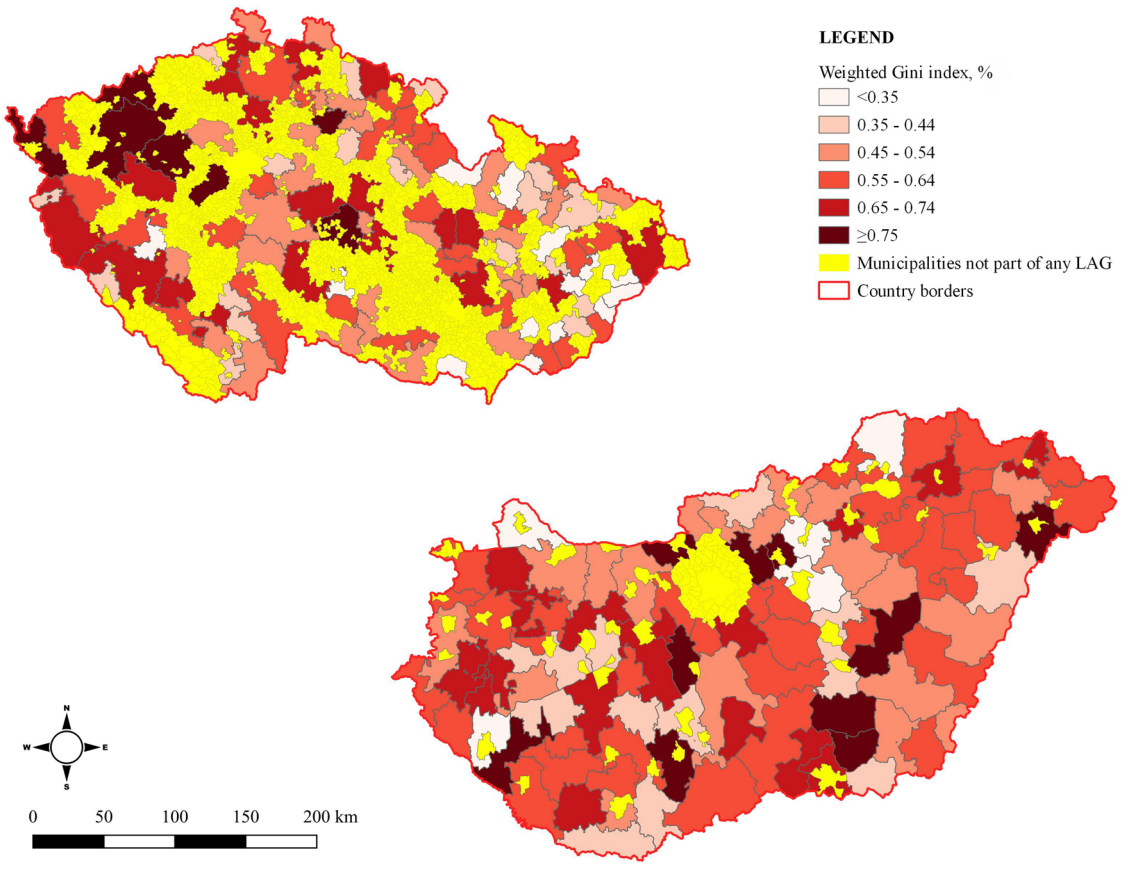

Figure 3. The differences for the LAGs in the distribution of LEADER funds allocated in the period 2007–2013 using the Gini coefficient. Source: the authors.

Table 2. The number of LAGs in each Gini-coefficient category in the Czech Republic and Hungary. Source: the authors.

Gini-coefficient	Czech Republic	Hungary
<=0.35	14	5
0.35–0.44	18	12
0.45–0.54	28	18
0.55–0.64	28	34
0.65–0.74	19	17
>= 0.75	7	10
all in	114	96

Czech Republic, projects are more evenly distributed within municipalities, as 28 percent of LAGs had a Gini index value below 0.44 and more than half below 0.54. In contrast, in Hungary, support was more concentrated and spatially more uneven, as only 18 percent of LAGs had a GI value up to 0.44 and 36 percent up to 0.54.

The relationship between resource distribution inequality and the number of member municipalities in action groups

The number of settlements within each local action group varied widely. There are local action groups that have a high number of settlements among their members. Our hypothesis is that LAGs with fewer settlements were able to provide resources to their territories more evenly. In Figure 4, we can see the number of settlements within the local action groups in the Czech Republic and the corresponding Gini index values which show the inequality of distribution. With regard to the LAGs in the Czech Republic, it can be seen that the distribution of LEADER funds is independent of the number of member settlements, with both high and low inequality occurring in the case of smaller and larger LAGs (Figure 4). In

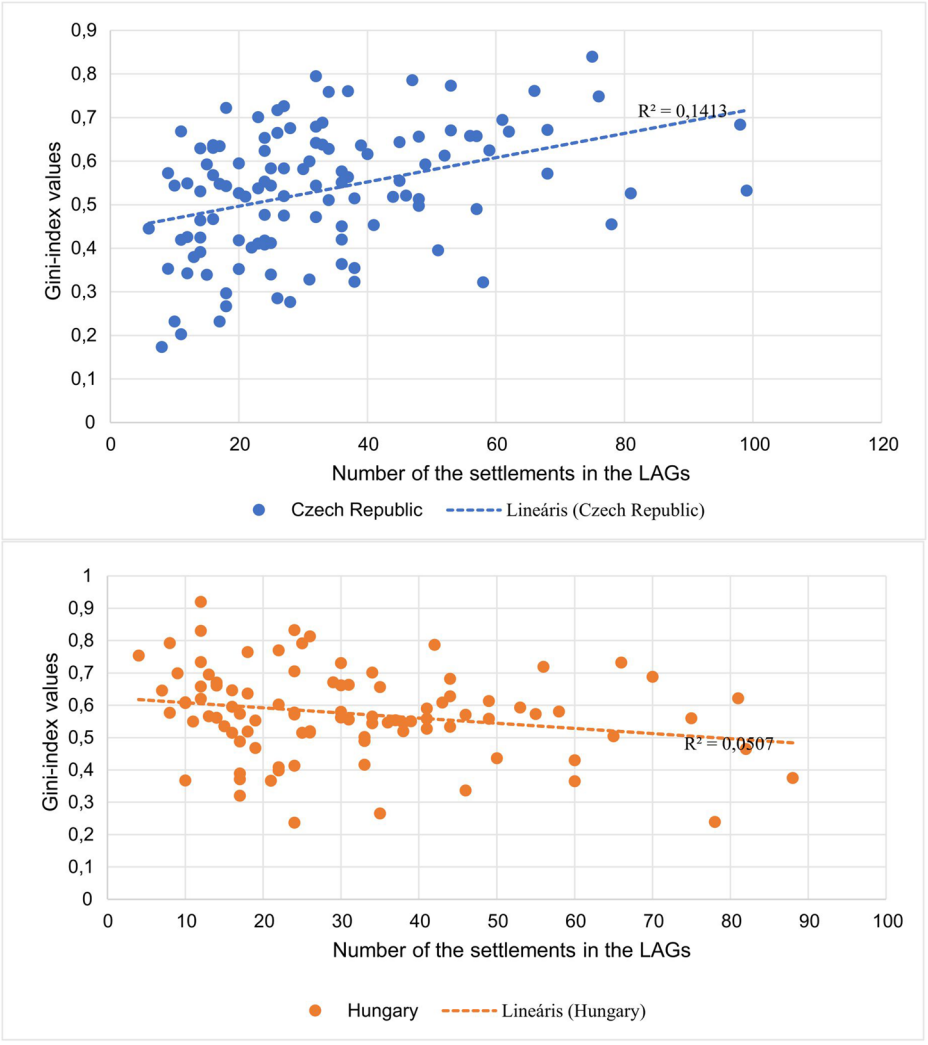

Figure 4. The number of settlements and the Gini index values of the Czech and Hungarian LAGs. Source: the authors.

the action group in the Czech Republic that produced the lowest Gini index of resource distribution inequality, there were a total of 8 municipalities. Meanwhile, in the local action group showing the highest Gini index, there were 75 municipalities.

It can also be seen in Figure 4 the number of settlements in the Hungarian LEADER local action groups and the corresponding Gini index values. Concerning this country, it can be observed that, in contrast to the Czech LAGs, the number of settlements within each local action group is generally lower. The highest inequality is seen for a relatively small LAGs, which had a total of 12 member settlements in the period under examination, and the lowest Gini index value was achieved by a local action group consisting of 24 member settlements.

The graphs (Figure 4) show that the increase in the number of municipalities in the local action groups is not related to the calculated Gini index values. Therefore, the number of municipalities in the local action groups does not have an impact on resource distribution inequality.

Search for dependence in the degree of inequalities and the density values

Figure 5 shows the population density of the LAGs and the corresponding Gini index values. Of the two countries, Hungary has relatively smaller local action groups. In the Czech Republic, the presence of LAGs with a higher population density is more typical. In Hungary, the average population density of the local action groups is 58 people/km^2, while in the Czech Republic, the average is 89 people/km^2. In the Czech Republic, the lowest population density is 25 people/km^2. This value was achieved by two local action groups, one with

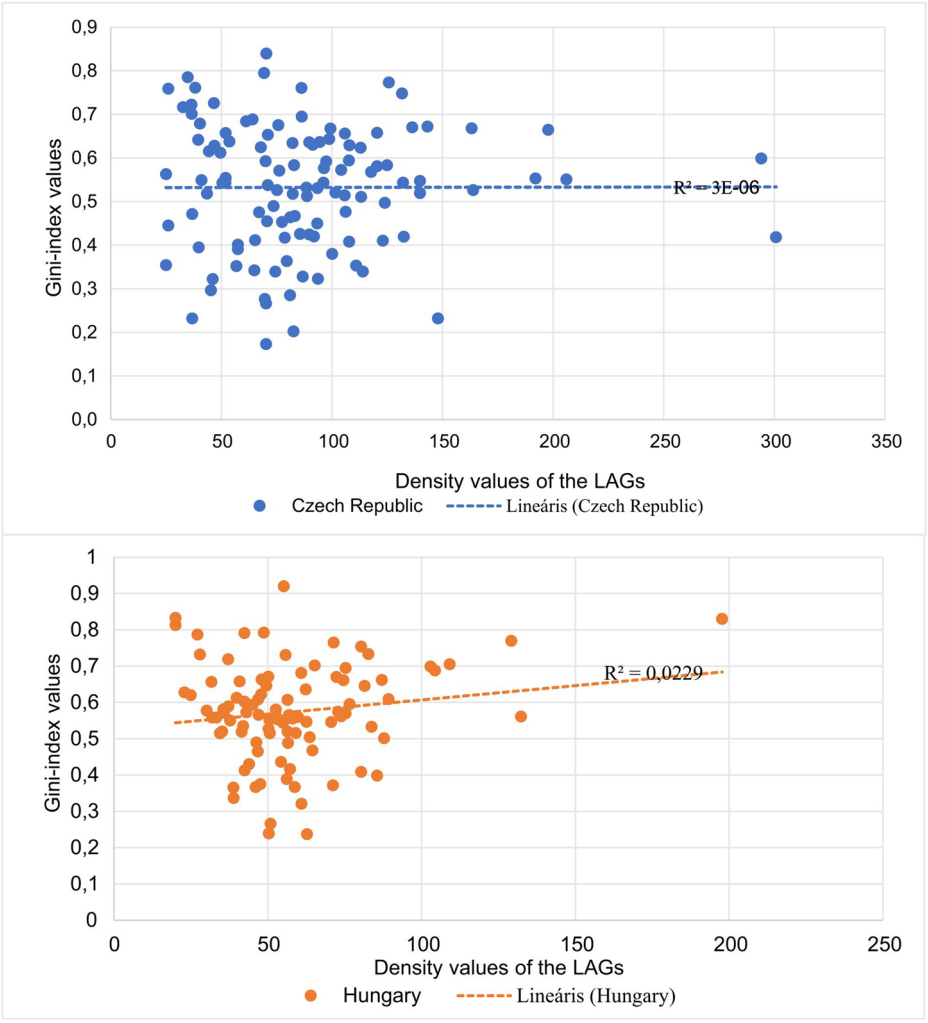

Figure 5. Population density and Gini index distribution in the Czech Republic and Hungary. Source: the authors.

a Gini index value of 0.56 and the other with a Gini index value of 0.35. The local action group with the highest population density has a Gini index value of 0.41. In Hungary, the lowest population density is 20 people/km^2. This value was achieved by two local action groups, one with a Gini index value of 0.81 and the other with a Gini index value of 0.83. These indicate very high inequality. The local action group with the highest population density has a Gini index value of 0.82. However, only one of them shows a smaller resource distribution inequality. It cannot be determined whether local action groups with smaller or greater population densities distribute LEADER resources with more or less inequality local action groups.

Comparison of the resource distribution of the action groups with the age and population density of the action groups

We examined the correlations between the operation duration of the LAG and its population density and the distribution patterns of the local action groups. We looked at the correlations between the resource distribution inequalities in the low and high population density category, as well as in the old and newly created ('young') LAGs. An 'old LAGs' refers to one that was established and began its work right after the 2004 European Union accession, while a 'young LAGs ' is one that was only formed at the beginning of the 2007 cycle. We thought that the most uneven distribution of resources would be among local action groups belonging to the young and low population density category.

Table 3 contains the representation of the above relationships. We took the average and standard deviation of the Gini index values for the four categories that we had established. In the case of the

Table 3. Connection between LAG population density, age of the LAG, and the value of the Gini index. Source: the authors.

High population density			High population density		
young LAGs			old LAGs		
	Czech Republic	Hungary		Czech Republic	Hungary
Std. Deviation (Gini-index):	0,14	0,15	Std. Deviation (Gini-index):	0,13	0,14
Average (Gini-index):	0,55	0,40	Average (Gini-index):	0,53	0,59
low population density			low population density		
young LAGs			old LAGs		
	Czech Republic	Hungary		Czech Republic	Hungary
Std. Deviation (Gini-index):	0,15	0,12	Std. Deviation (Gini-index):	0,11	0,24
Average (Gini-index):	0,51	0,56	Average (Gini-index):	0,50	0,55

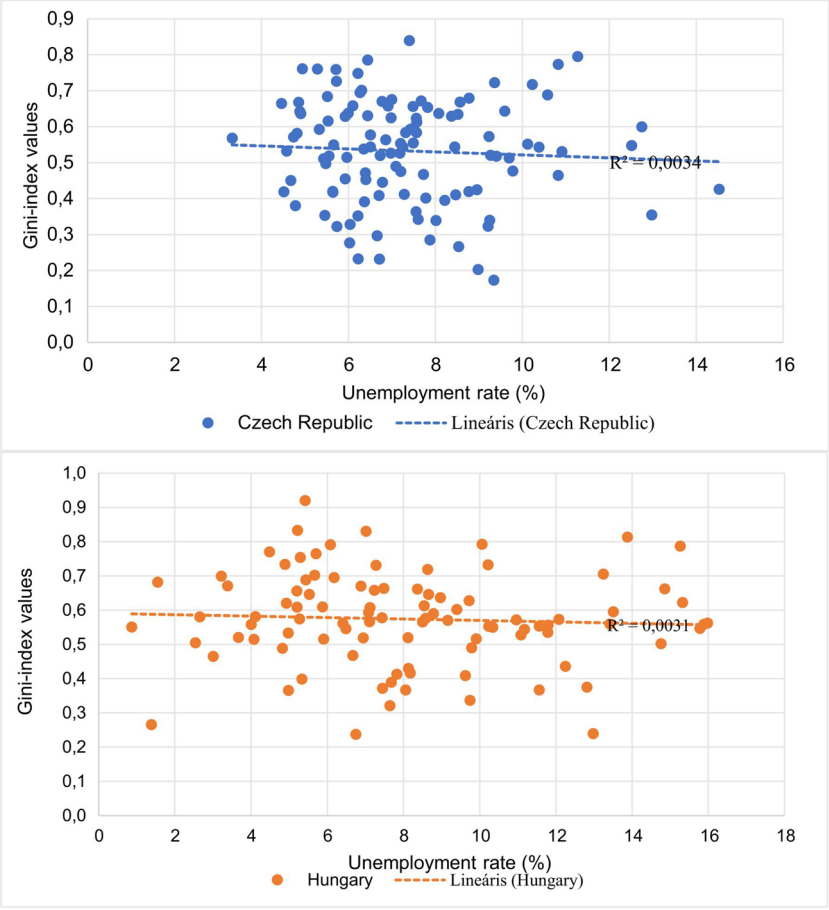

Figure 6. The unemployment rate and the Gini index values in the Czech Republic and Hungary. Source: the authors.

Czech Republic, it can be observed that, on average, LEADER funds were shared more evenly among the LAGs that had been established earlier than the local action groups that began work in the 2007-2013 period. However, this claim was not verified in the case of Hungary. Additionally, LAGs with a lower population density usually distributed the available funds more evenly.

Exploring the relationship between the distribution of resources of the action groups and the unemployment rate

We also compared the unemployment rates of the local action groups with their resource distribution inequality (Gini index). Of the two countries, the unemployment rate in the Czech Republic has a wider range. Based on Figure 6, it can be seen that, among the local action groups for LAG areas with lower

unemployment rates, the distribution is more even – but the correlation rate is low. In the case of Hungary (Figure 6) the trend is similar.

The relationship between the allocation of resources and per capita income of action groups

Figure 7 shows the correlation between per capita income in the settlements in the LAGs and the Gini inequality values, in the Czech Republic and Hungary, respectively the figures clearly show the income differences between the two countries. In the Czech Republic, the average unemployment rate in the local action groups was 7.3%, while in the Hungarian local action groups, it was 8.9%. In the Czech Republic, the local action group with the lowest unemployment rate had a Gini index value of 0.56, while the local action group with the highest unemployment rate had a Gini index value of 0.42.

In Hungary, the local action group with the lowest unemployment rate had a Gini index value of 0.55, while the local action group with the highest level of unemployment had a Gini index value of 0.56. Based on these figures, it cannot be said that the local action groups for settlements belonging to the higher per capita income category distributed the LEADER funds more equally.

Comparison of a resource distribution inequality of the age of action groups

In the period between 2007 and 2013, there were 68 Hungarian and 10 Czech local action groups that had already been active during the LEADER+ period (older LAGs). We hypothesized that LAGs that had been operating for a longer time would distribute the LEADER funds more evenly in the period between

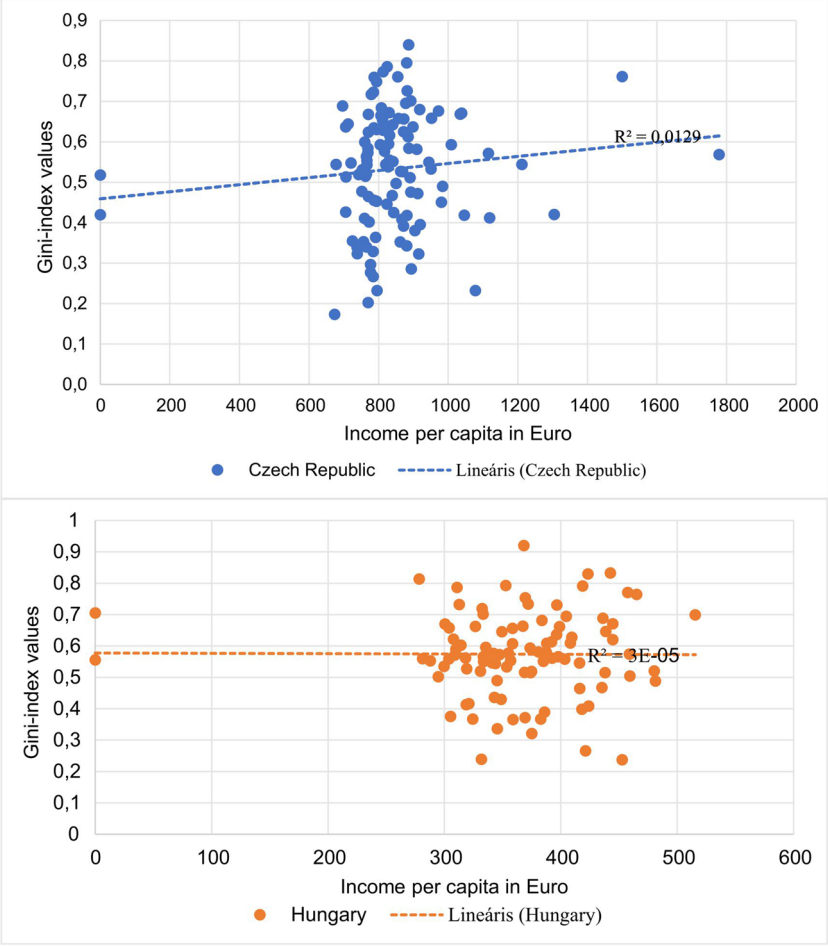

Figure 7. The income per capita and the Gini index values in the Czech Republic and Hungary. Source: the authors.

Table 4. LAGs grouped by time of participation in the LEADER programme (Czech Republic and Hungary). Source: the authors.

	Czech Republic							Hungary						
	Gini-coefficient values													
	<=33	0.35–0.44	0.45–0.54	0.55–0.64	0.65–0.74	>=0.75	all	<=33	0.35–0.44	0.45–0.54	0.55–0.64	0.65–0.74	>=0.75	all
older	1 (10%)	2 (20%)	3 (30%)	3 (30%)	1 (10%)	0 (0%)	10	5 (7.3%)	7 (10.3%)	11 (16.1%)	27 (39.7%)	12 (17.6%)	6 (8.8%)	68
newer	13 (12.5%)	13 (15.3%)	25 (24%)	25 (24%)	18 (17.3%)	7 (6.7%)	104	0 (0%)	5 (17.8%)	7 (25%)	7 (25%)	5 (17.8%)	4 (14.2%)	28

2007 and 2013. We examined the local action groups that had already implemented the programme during the LEADER+ period.

In Hungary, there were many more local action groups during the LEADER+ period than in the Czech Republic (Table 4). The vast majority of LAGs that had been operating for a long time distributed resources between settlements with medium or high inequality while, remarkably, none of the newer LAGs showed a low inequality result.

Discussion

The findings reveal significant variations in the geographic distribution of endorsed projects when comparing the two countries. Within the Czech Republic, there is a more balanced distribution of projects across municipalities. The first hypothesis of the research was that local action groups with fewer member settlements were able to distribute financial support among their members more evenly. In the two monitored countries, groups with between 11 and 40 settlements were the most common. The number and proportion of smaller LAGs (those having fewer than ten member settlements) was extremely low, but the LAGs with a small number of settlements did not show a particularly even distribution of LEADER resources. A certain reason for this is the fact that funds for LAGs are allocated based on the size of the population living in the LAG. If the municipalities in the LAG are relatively small, the funds to support local projects are also low and thus do not allow them to support a larger number of projects. In other words, given the rules of financial allocation for LAGs (Konečný et al., 2020), it is not important in terms of the spatial distribution of funds and how large the number of municipalities in the LAG is.

Therefore, we assumed that a more important criterion for the equal distribution of support to local projects would be how large the municipalities in the LAG are in terms of population or population density. It was proposed that LAGs with members with a higher population density would be characterized by a more even distribution pattern, as the social networks of urban regions are denser. According to our examination, none of the population density categories can be said to have a particularly even distribution of LEADER resources. On the contrary, LAGs covering densely populated areas – to a small extent – distributed the aid more unevenly. Presumably in these LAGs, there are more townships with bigger financial and organizational capacity (Cañete et al., 2018) which can gain relatively more resources.

There is no clear correlation between the inequality in resource distribution of the local action groups and the number of member settlements.

Our second assumption, LAGs with higher population density, lower unemployment, and higher per capita income are characterized by a more even distribution of resources. According to other studies (Cañete et al., 2018; Masot & Alonso, 2017) it was also proposed that areas that were economically more advanced (with lower unemployment and higher income) were able to disperse financial aid more consistently, as their social connections were more intensive. Regarding the correlation between the unemployment rate and the distribution of resources, most LAGs distributed resources with moderate inequality. In terms of per capita income, most local action groups were also classified in the medium inequality category. Our original hypotheses were not confirmed: on the contrary, poorer areas seemed to have more solidarity. This supports the findings of Rifkin (2010), who stated that if humans face greater challenges, they may become more empathetic and cooperative, and the socio-psychological research of Stellar et al. (2012), which showed that lower-class people are more likely to be compassionate.

According to the third hypothesis, the LAGs that had been active for longer were more embedded into the local society, and consequently in their areas a more even allocation of financial support prevailed. Regarding the experience of the LAGs, it was thought that the local communities that had been operating for a long time would distribute the LEADER resources more evenly among their settlements. Although, based on the existing analyses, this cannot be verified unambiguously, the fact that – at least in the case of Hungary – the distribution practices of all the new LAGs belonged to the uneven category makes this question worth examining more deeply. Lukesch (2007) differentiates eight forms of governance, identifying a development process from the 'survival' stage to the most developed stage, 'sustainability'. In between, one can find the phase of 'equality' in which the local collaboration functions as a forum for discussions and conflict resolution. This involves the introduction of new participants and the consistent implementation of participatory development approaches, all with the aim of establishing a collective vision for the region.

Our study reveals that there was no close relationship between the indicators used in the investigations carried out during the research and the distribution of LEADER funds. The distribution of LEADER funds among settlements can be influenced by other socio-economic factors. The dependence of the distribution of project support on selected socio-economic indicators of the territory has been demonstrated in the case of a specific support area, e.g. organic farming (Průša et al., 2022).

The research and its interpretation have several limitations:

1. The projects studied were implemented in the period 2007–2013 and since then the mechanisms of delivery of the LEADER principle to the territory have changed (e.g. implementation of CLLD, use of multi-fund approach).
2. The statistical procedures used allow to reveal mainly the evenness of the distribution of supported projects and fail to capture internal differences within LAGs.
3. The expression of the relationship between the equal distribution of support and the characteristics of the territory represents only an introduction to the topic and for a deeper understanding it is necessary to conduct follow-up intensive research in selected case study sites.
4. The uneven distribution of projects in an area may not be perceived as inappropriate, especially if it reflects the absorption capacity of the area.
5. The distribution of support is influenced by external factors, in particular the efforts of national authorities to control the direction of support (i.e. a combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches) (Csurgó & Kovách, 2016; Konečný et al., 2021; Navarro et al., 2016).

Conclusions

The study examines the LEADER local action groups that operated between 2007–2013 and their resource distribution activities. Furthermore, it focuses on the possible correlations between the activity of resource distribution and various socio-economic indicators. The research reveals that neither the age of the LAGs nor the number of settlements of the local action groups has a great impact on the equality of LEADER resource distribution.

We concluded that the examined socio-economic indicators have no influence on the distribution of resources. Therefore, it is questionable whether any other socio-economic factors can be found that would condition the distribution, such as the educational level of the population, their economic activity, the level of entrepreneurial activity, the structure of the economy, or the indebtedness of the municipalities.

The article contains an international comparison that is not typical of previous studies. Research on this topic is essential so that in the future the LEADER programs are grouped into the areas of greatest need by local action groups and countries.

One of the opportunities for further development of this research is to include more countries in the comparison, or perhaps to expand the range of object metrics and indicators related to re-source distribution inequality. As an opportunity for further development, we see that the data for the 2007–2013 period can be compared with the resource distribution inequality of 2014–2020, which seems to be slowly coming to an end.

We consider the limitations of the research to be, among other things, that it is difficult and also time-consuming to access the data for funds allocated from the LEADER source database. Furthermore, there is no complete database available that covers, for example, how many applications were received for each settlement and how many applications were supported (for Hungary).

Notes

1. https://www.mfcr.cz/en/.
2. https://nav.gov.hu/.
3. https://www.mpsv.cz/web/en
4. https://www.oeny.hu/oeny/teir/#/.

Authors' contribution

Adél Veselicz (corresponding author) contributed to the conception and design, acquisition and analysis of data, and manuscript drafting.

Ondřej Konečný contributed to the study conception and design, data acquisition, and proofreading of the manuscript.

János Pénzes contributed to the study conception and design, data acquisition, in choosing a methodology, and proofreading of the manuscript.

Csaba Patkós contributed to the study conception, design, data analysing, and proofreading of the manuscript.

All the authors read and approved the manuscript. All authors assume responsibility for the work created. All authors meet the authorship criteria.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The authors state that this research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors. No potential competing interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

The authors state that to make data and materials supporting the results or analyses presented in their paper available upon reasonable request.

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