

# Rural development and collective learning in Germany

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## 1. Gathering, talking, learning

In Germany, Local Action Groups (LAGs) are involved in community development and in 2020 there were approximately 321 groups operating in Germany. The activities of LAGs range from local branding and rural tourism to Local Production for Local Consumption and entrepreneurship support (Jasper and Schievelbein, 1997) and more recently, demographic change and climate change. LAGs gather to have discussions and learn how to build and develop their communities based on shared experiences. This is known as collective learning.

In 1991 the European Union (EU) began an initiative in rural areas to promote projects that would make the most of each area’s local assets. Europe has a large variety of rural areas, and only the local residents know what each area has to offer. Therefore, the EU launched the LEADER Programme to encourage a bottom-up approach to community development. In this Programme, local residents and organizations form LAGs, define LEADER areas, and work together to develop communities using grants obtained after a project proposal is submitted and approved.

The EU has clarified that the focus of the evaluation of the granting of funds is objectively based on the expected results of the project for state governments, and on the pursuit of collective learning through self-evaluation for LAGs. The evaluation system and methods have also been established.

This paper examines collective learning in local development as an outcome of “Studies on evaluation methods and systems of EU rural development” (JP19H03068) (Iida et al., 2022a).

## 2. A cycle of rural development learning from collaborative experience

One of the conditions that needs to be met before funding will be granted for a project is that the local people must deal with new challenges that they have not faced before. As local residents gather and talk together, they learn from their experiences (Kolb, 1984) and learn to systematically tackle new things (Dixon, 1994) as they advance the project (Figure 1). This is a cyclical progression of (1) observing the current situation and identifying issues in the community, (2) creating a plan for rural development, (3) trial and error, (4) full-scale measures, and (1) reevaluating such efforts.

The researcher was told by one of the LAG managers that “local challenges emerge, are resolved, and emerge anew. By the time the seven-year grant period ends, the Local Action Group will have gained a clear view of the local challenges, rural development strategy and direction, and is better able to meet its goals.”

## 3. Learning from self-evaluation

Pollermann et al. (2009) of the Johann Heinrich von Thünen-Institut (vTI) found that when learning through self-evaluation, LAGs can increase coordination between different actors involved LEADER process (Effect 1) and increase the motivation of the local people (Effect 2). This study confirmed that LAGs learned from self- and peer-assessments and increased the LEADER process involving coordination between different actors (Effect 1: all 6 regions). Meanwhile, the local people’s motivation increased in the regions where they were consulted and carried out self-evaluation

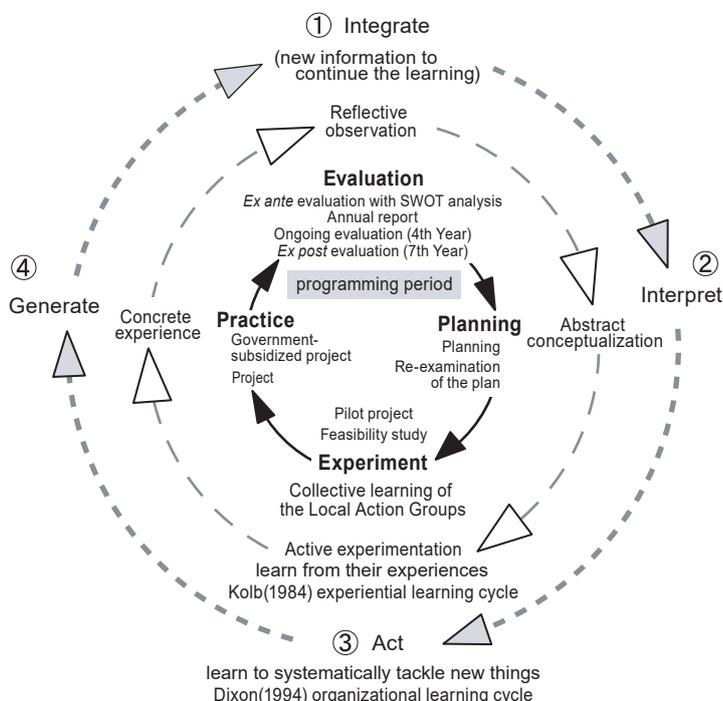
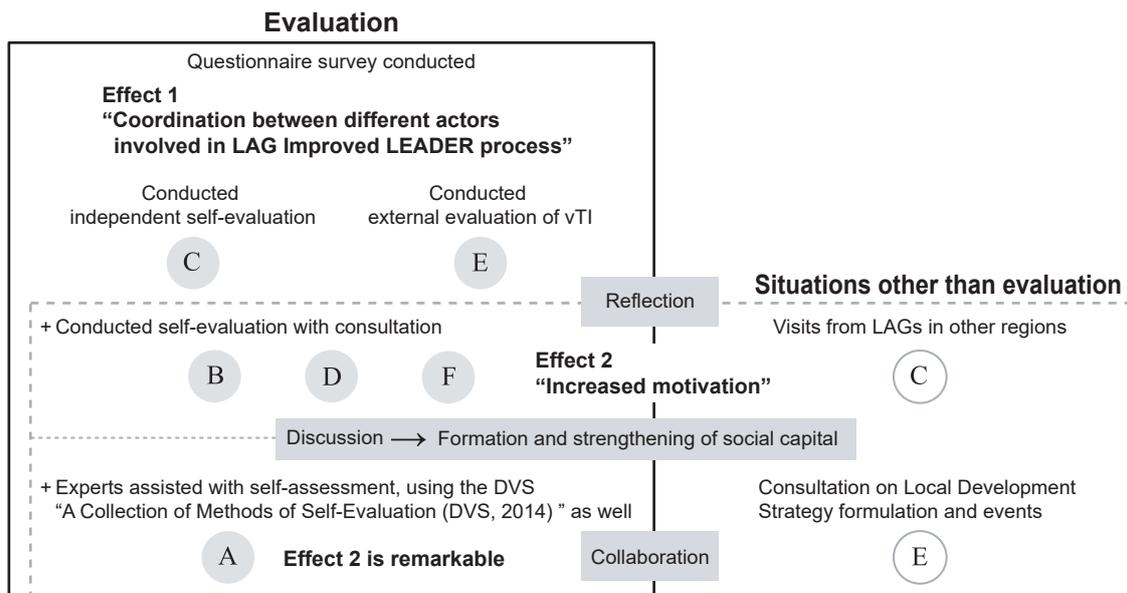


Figure 1. Collective learning cycle (grant period is 7 years)



Note: A through F are the six case study areas in this study.

(Effect 2: Regions A, B, D, and F). For example, during the self-assessment, there were offers of cooperation among government-subsidized projects for rural development, the creation of a rural development fund, and the promotion of inter-regional collaboration.

#### 4. Collective learning to establish and strengthen “social capital”

The Federal Office for Agriculture and Food (DVS, 2014) has published a “Collection of Self-Evaluation Methods” for LAGs. Many LEADER regions use a variety of methods and self-evaluation techniques when they meet and discuss their projects and experiences. In a previous study, Putnum showed that the social capital of trust, norms, and networks is useful for regional development. In this study, we considered that diverse activities in the region were coordinated and activated, and voluntary cooperation occurred (Putnum, 2001) as people in the region gathered together to talk.

There are also further occasions for LAGs to gather, talk, and learn in the LEADER regions, even when no evaluation is taking place. In the LEADER interregional exchange, LAGs introduce their projects to each other, and the participants reflect on their own projects to gain insight into their endeavors. They often feel a sense of pride in having impressed people from other regions, and are able to conceive new ideas. The state government also discusses the evaluation results with the LAGs and assists to improve the implementation of certain measures.

#### 5. Gathering to discuss rural development

To introduce the collective learning methods practiced in the LEADER regions to Japan, this study published “*Let's get together and talk: Japanese and European Rural Development: Illustration of Let's Enjoy the 5 Steps!*” (Iida et al., 2022b) (cover shown in Figure 3). This book is a guide for LAGs and (other) councils for regional development to advance through the five steps of rural development: “look,” “create,” “try,” “expand,” and “rethink,” while gathering and talking together. With the cooperation of DVS in Germany, the book also includes excerpts from “Collection of Self-Evaluation Methods (DVS, 2014: Selbstevaluation in der Regionalentwicklung - Leitfaden und Methodenbox).”

The Nyan-co Action Group (rieco) will set out the talking points, write-up printouts and illustrations, describe the seven tools of rural development, gather the toolbox, and an encyclopedia for checking to prevent disappointing council meetings (Sust). The operation of a LAG in Finland (Asai), community-owned village shops in Germany (Ichida), sustainable lifestyles (Iida), and local brands of native chestnuts in France (Suda) take readers on a tour of various regions in Europe.



Figure 3. “Let’s get together and talk”

In Japan, there are many rural development projects where people gather together to discuss local issues. These include Aya Town's "AYA SCORE" mobile app social score system for mutual aid community development (Sasaki), citizens' community and health development in Tono City (Hirakata), the "Tsunagaru Meeting" (Kunii and Tanaka) in the Ukawa area of Kyotango City, Japan, which was presented by the Policy Research Institute, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries' "Research on rural innovation through the use of ICT and various resources" Team. We are immensely encouraged by the communities who are tackling local issues with ingenuity and creativity.

Please also visit the "Yamagata Renewable Energy Network (Yamaene)" (Miura) and "Energy Town Planning (ENERGY MACHIZUKURI)" (Takeuchi) sections. When people gather to talk and connect with each other, a "poetic place" incorporating elements of the region's particular nature, history, culture, and narratives is created (Ipsen, 2005). We hope that this book will help you to gather, discuss, and promote rural development based on the character of your own region. We would like to thank everyone in Japan and Europe who contributed to this research and its publication.

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