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## EVALUATION OF SELECTED QUALITY OF LIFE INDICATORS IN LAG “DOLNÁ NITRA”

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The paper focuses on quality of life of inhabitants in Slovak countryside as well as conditions for development of municipalities on possibilities of drawing European funds and the performance of Local Action Groups. Its main objective is to evaluate the effect of the Slovak Rural Development Programme 2007–2013 measures on increasing the quality of life in a selected region and to compare results in municipalities that were part of a public-private partnership and those they did not participate. The paper mainly deals with quality of life indicators defined in the field of employment and quality of employment.

**Keywords:** local action groups, LEADER approach, indicators, employment quality of life

The concept of life quality is broad and it covers all the aspects unfolding around human development (Murgaš, 2008). It is affected by many factors whether of internal or exogenous character, by individual hierarchy of values, but also by conditions that create its immediate environment. It is given by cultural and religious influences that significantly affect the formation of opinions and ideas widespread and accepted in society. Authors dealing with life quality issues agree that it has many dimensions (Ira and Andraško, 2007; Kováč, 2001; Verdugo et al., 2010; Cobb, 2000). There is also a consensus, that on the one hand, it represents objective conditions for a good life and on the other hand, its subjective experience (Horňák and Rochovská, 2007; Pacione, 2003; Potůček a i., 2002; Hayo and Seifert, 2003). Quality of life is a complex concept that incorporates many different material and immaterial aspects. It refers to the general well-being of people, groups or societies, and has been used widely within e.g., healthcare, policy and international development (Brauer and Dymitrow, 2014). There still does not exist a versatile and reliable definition of what the term life quality itself encompasses. However, both individuals and society aim to improve it. Improving life quality of communities is considered to be the main objective of community development. It is defined not only in the objectives of rural development policy, but also in local and regional strategic planning documents.

It has long been recognized by economists, geographers, sociologists, psychologists and others, however, that macro measures of national income are inadequate measures of the performance of an economy and wider society and have only a partial relationship with societal well-being. Such a singular approach can have its limitations in that economic progress does not necessarily ensure the provision of other factors that might be considered to be important for quality of life – for example, shared community values. Indeed,

there could possibly be an inverse relationship between economic development and some factors such as personal security or clean environment. Consequently, EU policy has been increasingly emphasizing the importance of equality, citizenship and public participation in decision-making (Brereton et al., 2011).

As the paper deals with assessing conditions and indicators of Slovak municipalities development in the context of the Slovak Rural Development Programme 2007–2013 (hereinafter referred to as “RDP 2007–2013”), in relation to the life quality, we consider necessary to note, that despite increased financial assistance from the European Union (EU), that municipalities and other entities could get after the Slovak Republic became an EU member, the research still points out lower life quality of citizens in rural areas compared to urbanized areas. Despite some comparative advantages, rural areas still have to face many problems. The fact that these areas cover approx. 80% of the EU Member States’ territory and 25% of its inhabitants live there, underlines the importance of the countryside and the need to solve its problems, both at European and national level. Slovakia is considered as a country with a predominantly rural character. Rural regions occupy almost 60% of Slovak area and are home of nearly 44% of the total population. Diversity is a typical feature of rural areas, not only in relation to geographical indications and the landscape, but also to the potential and the level of its use, the achieved quality of life in villages and the problems they face. Diversity can be perceived as a development opportunity, but at the same time a problem while creating strategies on macro level. Therefore, introduction of the LEADER approach to regional policy has been an important step in solving rural problems. It is a method that for more than 20 years have supported in a decentralized way the efforts of local institutions, organizations and individuals working in

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partnerships developing rural areas (according to the evaluations, rather successfully, and in different types of environments). LEADER became reality also in the Slovak Republic in the latest programming period as the 4<sup>th</sup> axis of RDP 2007–2013.

### Material and methods

Primary and secondary sources were used as inputs for the research. Primary sources are based mainly on data collected by the questionnaire survey. Secondary sources consist especially of scientific and professional literature, data from the LAG “Dolná Nitra” (e. g. annual reports, reports on LAG activities, The Integrated Development Strategy of “Dolná Nitra” territory, hereinafter referred to as “IDS”).

The LAG “Dolná Nitra” was registered under the Law Nr. 83/1990 on Associations of Citizens, as amended from October 26, 2007. The LAG “Dolná Nitra” is located in the southern part of the Nitra region. At the time of foundation it had 11,863 inhabitants, land area was 11,291.2 hectares, population density 105 inhabitants km<sup>2</sup> and it consisted of 11 associated municipalities. In 2015 it was extended by 6 new member municipalities.

The paper uses logical-cognitive methods with procedures of deduction, analysis, synthesis, scientific abstraction and comparative method:

- Theoretical evaluation, graphical summary of data on quality of life

indicators fulfilment in the area of employment.

- Questionnaire: The questionnaire survey was realised on a sample of 400 respondents from villages in the Nitra region from January 2015 to March 2015. The aim was to find out information about life quality in form of residents’ opinions from municipalities eligible for drawing sources within the RDP 2007–2013, both of the LAG territory as well as from villages which did not belong to the territory of the public-private partnership.

The questionnaire consisted of 67 questions divided into eight areas of life quality: living conditions, employment and quality of employment, health, safety, environment, leisure, government and fundamental rights. Where it was appropriate, we compared the findings of the questionnaire survey in the reference years 1989 (before Slovakia became an EU member), 2004 (EU accession), 2010 (implementation of the RDP 2007–2013 projects) and 2014 (effects from EU projects implementation). The part of the questionnaire relating to the area of employment consisted of 15 questions/indicators: the area the respondent worked in; place of employment; satisfaction with job opportunities in the village/for women/for men/for youth and satisfaction with jobs in the region; areas, where new jobs should be created; reasons, why jobs were not created; satisfaction with current jobs; form of employment

contract; commuting; number of hours at work per week; work in addition to normal working hours; frequency of work in addition to normal working hours; the probability of losing job in the next 6 months; likelihood of similar work.

### Results and discussion

Employment significantly affects the quality of life. In the questionnaire survey we first asked the respondents, whether they are employed in public or private sector. In villages outside the LAG, 40% of the respondents worked in public sector in 1989 and in 2004, in 2010 their share has slightly decreased, while in 2014 only 23% of respondents worked in public sector. In the villages of the LAG, the proportion of respondents working in public sector was somewhat higher, in 1989 it was 57% of answers, in 2004 50%, in 2010 48% and in 2014 52%. A rather broad administrative sector (including state and local governments at all levels, government agencies, etc.) is considered one of location advantages of the “Dolná Nitra” territory in the IDS (2007). During the whole period (years 1989–2014), most respondents were employed in the vicinity of their place of residence (from 35.8% in 1989 up to 41.5% in 2010). The second largest group were the inhabitants employed in the place of residence (from 23.05% in 2004 up to 28.81% in 2014). Majority of respondents were therefore citizens working quite close to their home (61.31%, 64.61%, 64.61%, 68.22%), that indicates there are relatively enough job opportunities in the surroundings. The fact that possibilities of finding job in “Dolná Nitra” territory are being improved and the number of unemployed has reduced since 2002 is proved in the strategy for 2007–2013 period, when job creation was not a priority for the LAG.

The data above are also confirmed by the outcomes of the analysis of respondents’ answers on the time that an employee needs for travelling to work. From the analysis it is evident that most employees get to work in 45 minutes by car (47% of all respondents and even 60% in case of respondents living outside the LAG territory), or up to 15 minutes on foot or one and

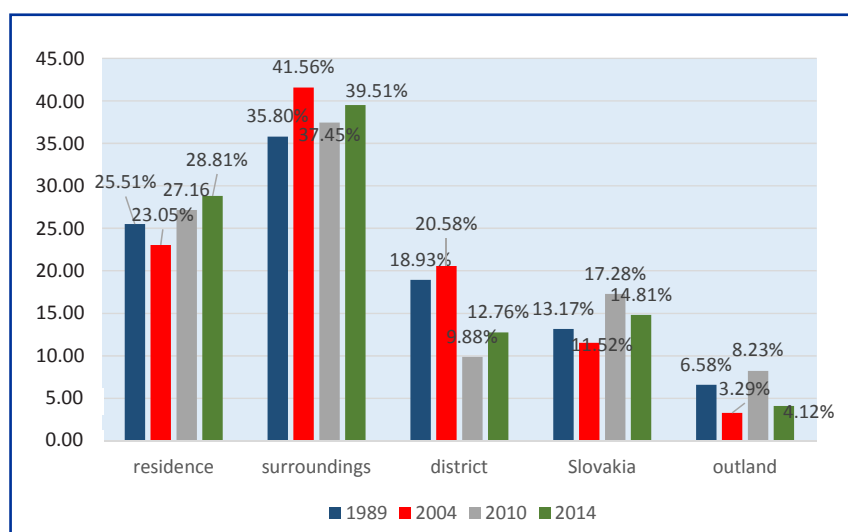


Figure 1 Employment of respondents depending on place of residence during the period 1989–2014 in LAG municipalities

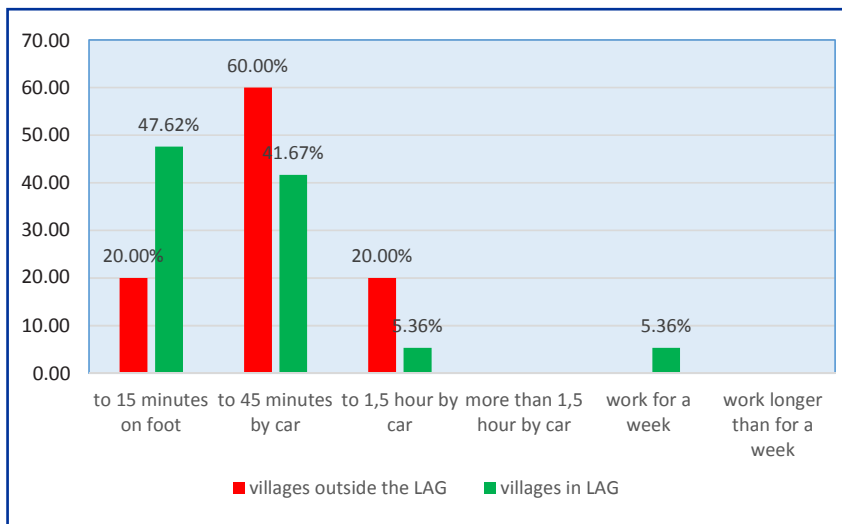


Figure 2 Distance to place of employment

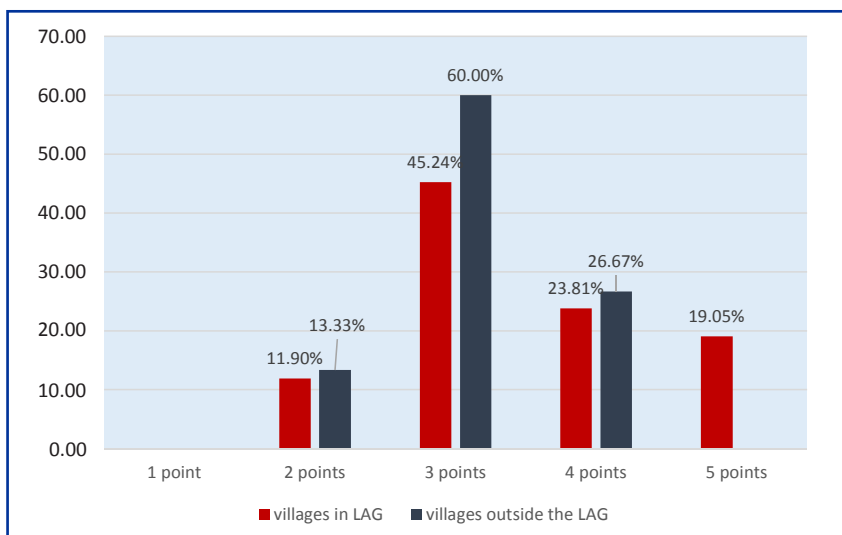


Figure 3 Respondents' satisfaction with current job

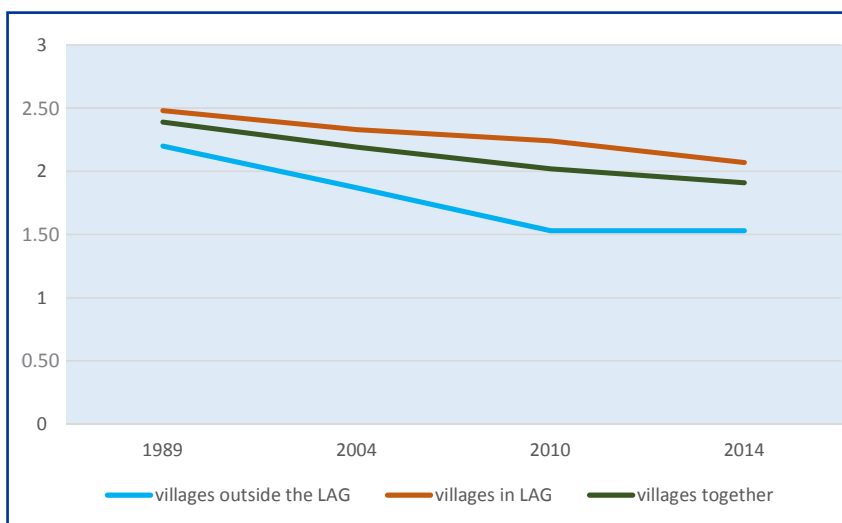


Figure 4 Development of job opportunities in the village

half an hour by car (20%). This means that the respondents do not have to travel far and they get to work in time, which is defined by the isochrone of attendance as tolerable (time limit of 45 minutes to one way trip).

The inhabitants of a micro-region and the surrounding villages were asked how satisfied they were with their current jobs, on the scale, where 1 point meant low satisfaction with current job and 5 points was the highest satisfaction. Their answers are reported in Figure 3.

Subsequently, participants were asked how satisfied they were with job opportunities in their village. The citizens were rather dissatisfied with the state of this indicator. They would assign it the value of 1.9 points on a scale between 1 and 5 points, where 5 points express the higher level of satisfaction. Comparing how respondents of both groups perceive the situation, we can conclude that the residents not living on LAG territory are somewhat more critical with the indicator. Job opportunities in their villages are decreasing.

Values of regional employment exceed the values of the employment in the village, in other words respondents perceive job opportunities in region somewhat more positive than employment in their municipality, however compared to 1989, it declines again.

When we asked the respondents where they think new jobs should be created, their answers are presented in Figure 5.

According to the Lower Nitra Regional Development Strategy (2007), the economic structure of the region has been especially formed by traders, although both manufacturing and processing industry are also represented in the municipalities. Strong businesses in industry (construction, engineering, wood) and viable agricultural cooperatives of high quality with long tradition are also active in the region. Based on data from the latest census of citizens, flats and houses from 2011, most inhabitants of the area worked in manufacturing (23.72%). The total of 14.05% of population was employed in retail and wholesale industries, and although the Lower Nitra area is characterized by agricultural production, only 4.9%

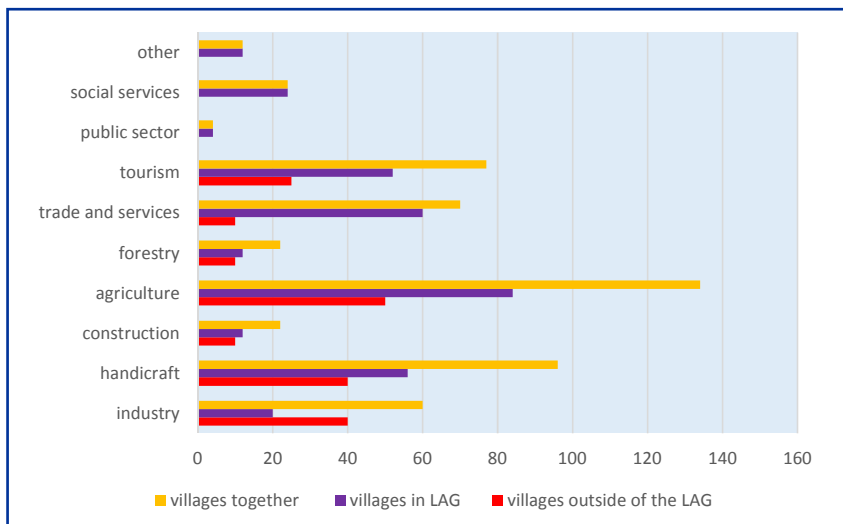


Figure 5 In which areas would it be necessary to create new jobs?

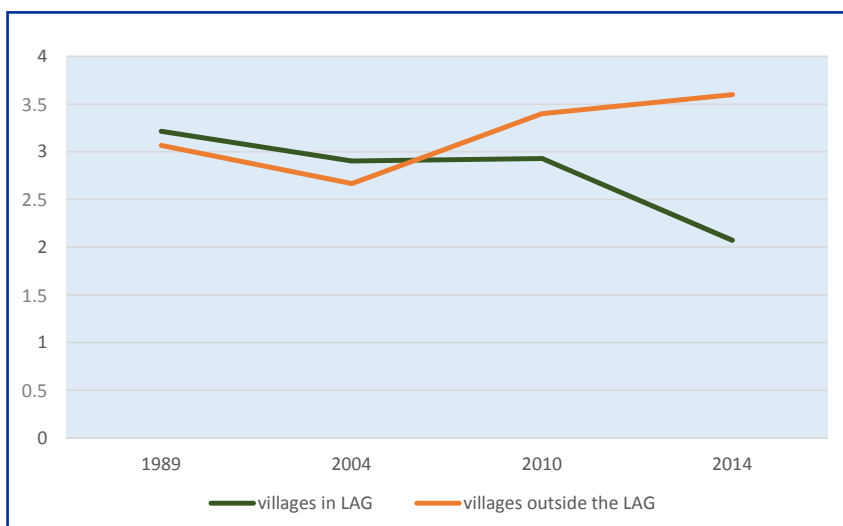


Figure 6 Development of working hours per week

of its population worked directly in agriculture as the historically most important sector of the economy in the area. Similarly, the sector is slowly declining in national economy, too. Most respondents think that jobs in their villages were not established due to lack of finance. As much as 36% of residents from small villages outside the LAG territory share this opinion and almost identical percentage of LAG residents (34%) as well. The second reason is the low attractiveness of the village (18% respondents in LAG, 12% outside the LAG). In the LAG villages, reasons like disinterest on the part of entrepreneurs (15%) and legal restrictions (11%) follow. The total of 10% of respondents saw the problem in the lack of citizens'

interest. In the second and third place for respondents from outside the LAG territory, there are lack of infrastructure (24%) and legislative restrictions (20%). Satisfaction with job is associated not only with financial aspect of paid labour, time and transport accessibility of employment, but also with a sense of security of having a job, redistribution of time between working and personal time and the overall satisfaction with the workplace (collective and relationships in workplace, stress and non-cash benefits).

Inhabitants' answers to the question how much time they spend at work are shown in the Figure 6.

The form of employment contract also testifies to job security. Employment contract for an indefinite

period, especially if it is a full-time job brings more certainty and therefore income stability for an employee. The total of 20% of respondents from the LAG and 17% from outside the LAG territory possess this kind of contract. Most respondents work full-time, but only for a set period (40%, resp. 35.71% of respondents). This form of contract may bring less sense of security and comfort for an employee. It used to be signed for a year's period or for a period of the project duration and automatically indicates a need to find a new employment after this period, which can be a problem in the labour market nowadays and can contribute to the stress reducing the overall well-being of an individual (stress, uncertainty, fear factor, depression etc.).

When asked how probably it was that the respondents could lose their job in the next six months, they answered on the scale from 1 to 5 points as follows: almost a third of them thought it is unlikely (33.74% – 5 points), 11.52% thought it was very probably they would have to look for a new job, 21.40% thought the likelihood of losing their job was about 2 points, 16.87% 3 points and 16.76% of respondents gave it 4 points. The average value representing the probability of losing job was 3.8 points for the respondents living outside the LAG area and 3.2 for those from LAG area, which indicates that the first group feels more confident with the actual job, however a total of about one third of the survey respondents were rather not sure with their work that largely affects the subjective sense of satisfaction and the level of life quality.

On the other hand, only 8.64% of respondents think they would be able to find a job with similar salary in a case they lost their job. 29.22% think the opposite and another 34.98% give it a low probability (2 points on a 5 points scale, where 1 point means "least likely" that the requested would find a job with similar salary).

### Conclusion

The questionnaire survey shows that the number of respondents working in the public sector gradually decreases, although their number in the LAG is slightly higher than in municipalities

that do not belong to its territory. This fact is also given in the strategy with data on a relatively large administrative sector in the territory (IDS, 2007). During the period 1989–2014, most employees worked relatively close to the place of their residence, either it was in their hometown or in the neighbourhood. According to the IDS the proximity of cities Nitra and Vrábľa, the innovative growth poles with existence of strong businesses generating enough jobs are the reasons for a relatively low unemployment rate in the territory. Comparing answers of both groups of respondents, more LAG inhabitants identified "hometown" as the place of their work that indicates there were more job opportunities directly in the micro-region than in villages that were not part of it. This fact is also reflected in data of the LAG strategy defining the area as a territory with a diversified economic base and a relative abundance of jobs. The LAG inhabitants also seem to be more satisfied with job opportunities in their municipality, even though both groups of respondents perceive regional employment better than employment in their villages. The answers also show that the LAG residents spend less time in work. This logically means they can spend more time with their families, having more time for their hobbies and leisure, which leads to more individual satisfaction and higher level of life quality. On the other hand, those who live outside the LAG territory feel a little more confident about their jobs, although respondents from the LAG are more likely to find a new job with similar salary. Having summarized all the indicators used for the area employment and quality of employment, we can conclude that compared to 1989, the way that respondents perceive them got slightly worse and the analysis of them points to a higher level of satisfaction with the indicators in villages belonging to the LAG area than in villages that were not part of it in 2007–2013 period.

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