

## **Regional opportunities for community-led local development in the area of a Hungarian Leader Association, 2014–2020**

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**Keywords:**

rural development,  
regional development,  
leader,  
community-led local development,  
Hungary,  
European Union

Nowadays, both at the European Union and member state levels, special attention is paid to addressing inequalities in rural areas, with the community-led local development approach being one of the successful strategies. In Western Transdanubia (Hungary), the Treasure of Pannonia Leader Association (TPLA) is responsible for rural development tasks in the Győr agglomeration. This study examines the success of the application period from 2014 to 2020, the structure of the action group's network, and the changes that occurred during this period while also anticipating future trends, with particular regard to microenterprise development. The methodological basis of the research included questionnaires completed by companies located within the local action group's area, supplemented by interviews with the association's management members. The results indicate that the success of the leader program largely depends on the willingness of applicants, which varies from settlement to settlement and is expected to increase in the future. An additional opportunity for development is the expansion of the regional contact system, as the TPLA does not currently promote itself as a partnership network established by the action group.

*Online first publication date:* 18 September 2025

## Introduction

Regional development specialists and relevant politicians dealing with regional processes pay special attention to rural development at the European Union and national economic levels. These attentiveness and action are intended to counterbalance the disproportionate development of urban areas and the large-scale depopulation of rural areas. In the latter half of the 20th century, as a result of certain socio-economic processes and subsequent cultural changes, urbanization gained significant popularity. Thus, understandably, the majority of the developments affected cities because cities formed centers of concentrated population and represented the greatest demand for development. From the onset, research pertaining to settlement development and sociology identified problems afflicting rural areas. To mitigate unfavorable processes, a bottom–up rural development initiative, called the LEADER program, was created, which has been performing a pivotal role in the EU’s development strategy ever since.

LEADER is a relatively new program in Hungary founded in 2004. It coincides with Hungary’s accession to the EU. The program has created tangible effects that are noticeable in Hungary today.

The program underwent a significant transformation, moving beyond its initial focus on rural development. From the 2014 to 2020 period onward, the multi-fund LEADER approach is referred to as community-led local development (CLLD) because it also supported the creation of fisheries local action groups in member states since 2007 and local action groups (LAGs) in urban areas since 2014 (EC 2018, Servillo–De Bruijn 2018). In the case of Hungary, only rural action groups have been established. This is because fishing is not relevant due to geographical conditions, and there is no demand for LAGs in urban areas.

Unfortunately, the lack of information accessibility due to the Covid-19 epidemic makes it difficult to evaluate the success or failure of the program’s projects from the recent tender period of 2014–2020. Issues related to the implementation of the project must also be assessed as soon as possible because as the development period has come to a close, new challenges have arisen for the actors involved in rural development. In this regard, it would be easier to rectify the possible mistakes made in previous cycles and proactively address any difficulties or obstacles that could arise.

The jurisdiction of the action group of the Treasure of Pannonia Leader Association (TPLA), which is depicted in Figure A1 (see in Appendix), and primarily spans the Győr District, is worth examining. Although Győr is one of the most important economic centers of Transdanubia and the regional center of Western Transdanubia, the surrounding settlements still lag behind in many developmental measures. Settlements located further from Győr prove to be increasingly more vulnerable and may be at a cumulative disadvantage if they do not receive sufficient support for the implementation of projects that they would be unable to finance on their own. The reasons behind the successes or failures of the LEADER program

implemented in the settlements surrounding Győr must be explored. These measures will make it possible to find a plethora of solutions for various difficulties facing the LEADER action groups as they aspire to address inequalities throughout Hungary's rural settlements surrounding county seats.

Based on the above, the general objective of this study is to reveal the reasons behind the success and the failure of tenders announced in the period between 2014 and 2020 in the focus area of the Treasure of Pannonia Leader Association. The study fulfills this objective by formulating relevant proposals for the next application period. This general goal is realized through the following sub-goals and questions:

- Identify areas with economic and human resource shortages that require increased attention and funding.
- Examine the extent to which the share of businesses increased between 2014 and 2020 and how this could lead to additional impact for TPLA in the next application period.
- Explore whether support for the environmental self-development of small and microenterprises has been an appropriate complement to the implementation of the Economic Development and Innovation Operational Program (EDIOP), Territorial and Settlement Development OP (TSDOP), and other tenders.
- Assess whether the quality of the services provided by enterprises, production efficiency, and job creation has improved through the projects.
- Finally, examine the intensity of cooperation between the municipal, market, and non-profit sectors.

The TPLA's objectives included organizing community-building and identity-strengthening camps for young people to encourage them to settle locally. We will not examine this now because it is irrelevant to the development of businesses in the area and local infrastructure. To gain an overview of the current socio-economic situation of the larger villages around Győr and the isolated small villages in the Győr, Téti, and Pannonhalma districts, it is useful to examine the development efforts influencing the situation over the past 30 years. The work of the economic and social support systems is particularly noteworthy because the success of either national or EU development policies in the target area depends on the precise coordination of these development sectors.

An important cornerstone is the ability of these financial funds – despite their different perspectives, but shared purpose – to align their strategies on the same development plane. Even when this alignment is achieved, the strategy often fails to adequately address the specific difficulties and problems of the area being developed, in this case, rural areas. It is important to note that in this research, we examine the development opportunities from the perspective of the various actors involved, rather than simply assessing them through a specific scientific concept. Consequently, a multispectral approach is employed to address this more complex issue.

## Theoretical background

Since 1990, Hungary has sought to focus social science research on the processes generated by system change. Compounding the experiences of selective disinvestment in rural areas prior to 1990, enormous cultural, social, and regional differences developed between some rural areas over the following decades. This process of differentiation can still be observed today (Szilágyi–Uzzoli 2013). At the dawn of the system change, spatial scientists primarily focused on industrial crisis regions, where the symptoms of the transitional crisis oftentimes appeared more markedly than in the peripheral areas. There were research groups at the time that prioritized the complexities of the spatial structural transformation. These groups did not neglect the examination of rural areas and peripheries (Szörényiné Kukorelli 2001). Along with the strains on economic and social developments caused by the system change, the compatibility of EU and Hungarian regional and rural policy principles also remains as a prominent issue. This approach has led researchers toward European funds for rural development.

This also implies that, in the first half of the 1990s, European scale investigations dealt with structural rural development by addressing the application and monitoring of such processes. From the perspective of this study, this focus is important because this approach created the foundation of the LEADER approach. This approach manifested in a coherent focus on a limited number of development goals, use of strategic planning and evaluation, thorough multi-year programs, and attentiveness to the least developed regions (Egri–Kőszegi 2016, European Court of Auditors 2010). The introduction of these principles paved the way for the transformation of support practices in the second half of the 1990s.

In the second half of the 1990s, targeted area subsidies that were similar to the later, more mature LEADER principles emerged (i.e., related to village tourism, agricultural competitiveness, development of agricultural and general rural infrastructure, processing of various agricultural and forestry product diversification, or cultural heritage preservation). The development of local human capital was also included in the range of research objectives (i.e., improving employment, transforming the structure of agriculture, developing small and medium-sized enterprises, improving village living conditions, and improving human resources) (Egri–Kőszegi 2016, European Communities 2006). The need to build a new rural development institutional system and utilize a new funding apparatus raised the following question: can all of these new stimuli generate structural change in the target areas, and if so, with what efficiency? (Szörényiné Kukorelli 2001).

Approaching the turn of the millennium, a growing number of microregional level works were published, delving into the nuanced mosaic of the spatial structure. The study of the income-generating and investment-attracting pull factors of settlements also gained a prominent role, with which sufficient support possessed the potential to function as innovation poles in the future (Lados 2000). The development policy

changes in this decade have made it necessary to clarify the conceptual framework of regional development.

Thus, the 1990s represented progress in the field of clarifying the conceptual issues of regional development on the physical plane. The definition most in line with the goals of LEADER includes the improvement of living conditions and the quality of life, need for an attractive settlement environment, and high-quality products, services, or leisure and cultural activities (Enyedi 1996).

After the turn of the millennium, studies addressing rural inequalities placed increasing emphasis on the elements of sustainable development (Farkas 2002, Szakáll 1998). The focus on the principles of sustainable development has, among other things, laid the foundations for development models based on local resources.

It is therefore unsurprising that this time, development based on endogenous resources came to the forefront of interest, which is excellently embodied by the LEADER principles. The LEADER and subsequent CLLD approaches have made a substantial contribution to the mobilization of local, endogenous resources in rural areas over the past few decades. Analysis of relevant literature indicated that development projects were more successfully implemented where investments are linked to real needs and local, internal resources. This emphasizes the importance of neo-endogenous development based on bottom-up activities and the role of local communities in implementing enterprises aimed at raising living standards (Biczkowski 2020, Esparcia–Abbasi 2020, Ray 2006). Factors of development, such as the production and consumption of local products, the quality and quantity of human capital, the quality of the settlement's environment, and the sense of community identity (Farkas 2002, Jelenszkyné Fábíán 2009), play a prominent role. After the EU accession negotiations, the potential applicability of European development principles was clearly in the foreground (Farkas 2002, Rechnitzer–Smahó 2011, Szörényiné Kukorelli 2001). However, EU accession has brought new challenges and opportunities to the practical and theoretical approaches to rural development.

The theoretical framework of rural development has since expanded, namely, with the need to involve economic actors beyond the scope of agriculture. The advantages associated with rural areas have become increasingly diverse; hence, the research focus has also shifted toward the possibilities of applying a horizontal economic development policy. The combination of economic strife and the problems of rural areas created unique circumstances, through which solutions to certain settlement and rural development problems have been much more effective than before (Kostov–Lingard 2001). Studies have shown that community cohesion and identity are the key to sustainable rural development.

Based on the research focuses of the last decade, it has become clear that the cultural belonging of communities is not only reflected in traditions and a common way of thinking, but also in the field of political opinion formation and advocacy.

This aspect must be accounted for in the development of rural areas; however, for the goal of community development to be realized, the strengthening of the communities' identity must also be ensured. These principles are important not only in the field of community development, but also in further research on community governance and innovation.

Therefore, investigations focused on answering the question of how to encourage public cooperation and community management (Jávor 2020). Simultaneously, the investigation sought to address how economic and technological innovations can be connected with social innovation to provide a favorable effect on community capacities. In addition, to the role of the community and the sustainable development of rural areas, the solidarity between the EU member states and the examination of the creation of an inclusive society has become more valuable (Jávor 2020, Udvardy 2010, Zsigáné Pusztai 2013, Szalai–Fabula 2021, Nagy–Veresné Somosi 2022). A more detailed look at the experiences and problems of the LEADER program also sheds light on how local development initiatives influence community efficiency and economic innovation.

Concurrently, the objective was to provide a synthesis of the tangible experiences associated with the program, in addition to an exposition of the LEADER principles. Already in the period of the opening of pre-accession subsidies (Special Accession Program for Agriculture and Rural Development – SAPARD), an important question arose as regards what factors influenced the success of participation in development programs. Of these factors, particular attention was directed to the regional relationship systems and to the preexisting rural development experience (Farkas 2000). In the later stages of the process, after gaining full membership, researchers gradually drew attention to factors that could hinder the realization of the hopes attached to the program. Among these factors, the predominance of bureaucracy, lack of a project scope, and insufficient emphasis on decentralization were highlighted (Kassai–Farkas 2007). The LEADER program evaluation was not neglected during the 2007–2013 support period either (Farkas–Kovács 2018). It became evident that the problems related to the partnership (weak, asymmetric relationship systems, dominance of the mayors pushing the activation of other actors into the background) reduced the willingness to participate. Therefore, subsequent proposals fostered greater autonomy and simplification of the procedure (Póla et al. 2015, Jeney–Varga 2016, Katona–Kovács et al. 2011, Kis–Szekeresné Köteles 2011, Patkós 2018, Brooks–Kovács 2021). In many cases, centrally managed sectoral projects became prominent in mitigating the aforementioned local difficulties. The role of these initiatives in development policy decreased because large tenders do not prioritize rural development goals. Research attention focused on the adverse effects of this scalar change, which can lead to the depopulation of rural areas and the disappearance of motivated local management (Finta 2015). At the same time, international research offers new perspectives on the desired development paths for the rural economy.

The current international trends in scientific discourse also corroborate the abovementioned focuses related to the principles of LEADER (CLLD). The basis of the economic development of rural areas can primarily be the production of local products accompanied by the support of market and sales opportunities within the local economy (Fusté-Forné 2022, de Haro-Martí et al. 2023, Ashton 2019). In studies pertaining to rural economies, special emphasis is placed on encouraging the innovation of food-processing companies either by product and process development, marketing, or organizational development (Ashton 2019). Another critical facet of development opportunities is tourism (Pentz–Albert 2023, Lempek–Tésits 2021). The examination of which, in addition to sectoral approaches, is also cognizant of issues like social acceptance and willingness to host (Dadvar-Khani 2021). Furthermore, one of the focuses of structural studies is agritourism, an emerging sector of rural tourism, which is becoming increasingly popular among farmers interested in diversification. These international research results primarily evaluate the success factors of the sector (Quella et al. 2023). Nevertheless, frequently adverse developments in the quality of life of individuals residing in rural areas represent a novel challenge for regional policy.

Concurrently, the slowing down in the socio-economic development of rural communities presents as a growing problem in the international literature. Within the demographic research in international literature, the impact of young people's emigration on the age structure of small settlements and the socio-economic life of the countryside is emphasized. These studies primarily seek to explore the factors influencing young people's decisions (Sears 2022). Additionally, to promote community resilience, a number of proposals have been formulated (e.g., strategies based on art and creativity), which can become important tools for revitalizing the countryside (Qu–Zollet 2023).

The issue of rural employment and labor mobility also receives special attention (de Carvalho Fiúza et al. 2022, Walsh et al. 2021, Keresztes–Vámosi 2008, Lendvai et al. 2011). Investigations predominantly focus on automated technologies and their impact on local economies. The lack of digital literacy in rural communities can significantly slow down development in a rapidly changing business and economic environment and, at the same time, aggravate labor market challenges (Haugen et al. 2021). Emphasis is placed on methodological works supporting rural development decision-making by using complex indicators. These indicators are based on a number of factors, which, among others, relate to the components of rurality, rural development opportunities, local economic development, community resilience, and well-being (Oliveira et al. 2022, Nelson–Nguyen 2023).

## Methodology

This chapter provides a detailed overview of the methods based on the secondary and primary sources used during the investigation. Through document analysis and interviews, the investigation explores funding allocation, impact on businesses, and effectiveness of projects implemented between 2014 and 2020. The chapter also highlights the methodology used to assess various development indicators and the success of grant-supported initiatives in rural areas.

*Secondary source analysis:* During the investigation, in addition to a secondary literature analysis, a document analysis was also implemented, as we were able to familiarize ourselves with detailed program presentations. With the help of these, we examined the purpose of the LEADER principles and gained insight into the program's past and future ideas.

The TPLA has 62 member settlements, most of which are part of the Győr agglomeration. The municipalities play a prominent role both in terms of obtaining funding and in their willingness to apply for it. In addition, 75 entrepreneurs and 55 organizations and individuals representing the civil sector compose the association. Although these groups are individually smaller in number, their overall size is significant and fluctuating, with the potential to increase. This could have a major impact on the mechanisms for allocating funding.

The secondary data for the area covered by the TPLA come from the website of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office. Among other criteria, it was necessary to select indicators, such as the number of businesses and population. In the case of businesses, we used the 2014 and 2020 figures to illustrate the spatial structure change.

Data sets containing the 2011 unemployment, sewer network construction, highest educational level, and income tax level were necessary to designate the resource-deficient areas mentioned in the objectives. These were chosen because they are the indicators that most determine the living conditions and most accurately describe the human and physical infrastructures, which also decisively influence the spatial structure. We applied a ranking-based method using these data. Different scores were created by selecting the minimum and maximum values from the data series of each indicator, and then dividing the data set between them into quartiles. According to the quartiles, the evaluation was determined on a qualitative point scale from one to four. The obtained point values were averaged, and then this result was represented on a cartogram, where the settlements were divided into four categories along the value limits.

*Primary source analysis:* The informal interview with the president of the TPLA and the head of the association's work organization served as a basis for deciding the methods based on primary sources (the latter, among other things, is a member of the presidential committee of the Association of Leader Associations and holds a leading role at the regional level). In the almost one and a half hour interview, the personal opinion of the association's management regarding the success of the

application period and the relationship system built by the association was revealed. A methodological drawback is that the interviewee's opinion must be treated with reservations, as it reflects the subjective perspective of an individual. Additionally, the management of the association may be less inclined to identify shortcomings. The questionnaires sent out sought information on the implementation of projects that helped achieve the objectives of the LAG. The survey approached the exploration of problems from the actor's perspective. For this reason, the methodology did not focus on a specific research problem, and different questionnaires were sent to different actors. It is not necessary to be a member to apply for grants; it is sufficient if the headquarters of each organization is located in a member municipality. However, the application process is voluntary; hence, most applicants were members. Consequently, most of the questionnaires were sent to them.

The target groups comprise businesses and civil organizations located in the TPLA area successfully applied in the period between 2014 and 2020. Among all the supported applications, enterprises represent a significant force, accounting for almost 40%. This makes enterprises the second strongest pillar of the association during the application period in question. Businesses play an important role in rural development; as economic driving forces, they have a major influence on the rural society, whether individual, small, or microenterprises. Their employment role can also be decisive in the life of a settlement, and they provide income for the municipality with business tax. The investigation assessed, among other things, what types of developments occurred as a result of the grants received and to what extent and quality they were implemented. We asked how successful the developments were after their implementation and whether they solved the previously existing problems. The questionnaires were sent to the companies that applied during the mentioned period and were successfully awarded. Based on the data available to us, we sent questionnaires to a total of 28 of the 39 businesses that won the subsidy. Of these 28, seven were returned, corresponding to a return rate of approximately 25%. The questionnaire with specific questions is attached in Annex.

During the assessment project success, civil and church organizations were not examined on merit, as they represent a total of 14% of those who submitted applications. This was because of their low participation rate and lack of available resources. For the time being, their contribution to the social development of the region is still small. In the future, if more of these organizations submit applications, they would already form a more prominent part; hence, their investigation could be more relevant. Regarding civil and church organizations, we only evaluated the established relationship as effecting municipalities and businesses. Our research focuses on the entrepreneurial sector; therefore, we excluded local authorities from this survey, even though they represent the largest proportion of applicants. In a future study, it may be worthwhile to examine municipal projects and draw conclusions and estimates from the results of their LEADER projects.

## Results

### Some social, economic, and territorial characteristics of the examined area

In the first round, we examined the spatial structure of the human and physical infrastructures of the area covered by the TPLA. The scoring method was based on four indicators: unemployment, highest educational level (high school graduation and diploma), income tax rate, and sewer network construction.

The settlements located in the immediate vicinity of Győr, and along the main roads are – with a few exceptions – in a relatively better position compared to those located on the outer border of the agglomeration and far from the main roads. This discrepancy is caused by the better development of the settlement and inter-settlement infrastructures because the most important developments are first realized in the settlements connected by the main road network. In general, a marked concentration of population develops here because commuting to the surrounding cities for employment is the easiest from these settlements. Transportation by passenger vehicle is the fastest on the main roads, and the frequency of public transport is also higher in these settlements. The largest set of the most developed settlements in Appendix Figure A1 is located along highways 1 and 82. In historical retrospect, it is also true that the administrative units located along the main road 1 showed outstanding values in every century. Historical trade connecting Vienna with Buda played an important role in this. The settlements located along the road were in the forefront not only from a commercial point of view, but also from a service perspective. After the construction of the M1 motorway, their role was somewhat reduced, and it may happen that, over time, they could become bedroom communities serving Győr. However, we can still speak of one of the most dynamically developing areas in the examined area. The other outstanding settlement cluster is located on the route of road 82. These villages also owe their development to the main road, as it connects Győr and Pannonhalma (as a world heritage site). From an economic point of view, the villages located here have a serious appeal, which I will discuss in more detail later in the section on businesses.

For residents moving out of the city, it is essential to create an urban quality of life, and this requires higher technical infrastructural development (i.e., full-scale public works), which the local governments of the villages eagerly fulfill in the hope of population growth. The highest educational level is also influenced by reaching cities by road, as the ease of going to school every day can have a decisive effect. Higher income families living in more developed settlements can provide quality education for their children.

The quality of the place of residence and the financial situation of the people living there can also have an impact on the efforts of obtaining the highest possible education. Prestige can also play a role in higher education attempts. After obtaining a diploma, students often settle locally, further raising the development level of the

human infrastructure in the settlement. Land prices are quite high in villages located along main roads and close to the big city. Consequently, only those with higher incomes can afford to buy or build a house. For those who do not have the necessary resources, but choose the rural way of life, they live in more fragmented settlements. The problem in such fragmented villages is the distance from the main roads, as their opportunities to overcome lackluster living conditions are limited. This spatial infrastructure barrier is compounded by the previously mentioned employment, completion of studies, and other activities influenced by the possibility and willingness for mobility. The lowest points were given to settlements located on the outer border of the agglomeration. These are mainly small and tiny villages in Rábaköz bordering the Haneság and in Sokoróalja. Due to their low population and relative isolation, the majority of them face a continuous population decline and the threat of depopulation caused by higher mortality and emigration. There is also a smaller group of settlements between highways 82 and 83, which also has weaker development indicators, providing an excellent example of the inner periphery and isolation. These villages are deemed as resource-poor areas. In the future, they must be given a special role, as the abovementioned sources of inequality may become stronger over time. The LEADER program can offer these settlements a suitable solution and promote their future development (see in Appendix Figure A2a).

### **LEADER/CLLD resources coming to the region and spatial development**

The budgetary background of the domestic LEADER program is provided by the rural development program. In the application period of 2014 and 2020 that we examined, the EU added EUR 3.4 billion, while Hungary added EUR 737 million as co-financing to this budget source (Government of Hungary 2014). Due to the government's decision, the LEADER associations received roughly 5% of the MVP in the mentioned period, which corresponded to HUF 45 billion (EUR 128 million, the average exchange rate in 2020 was 351 HUF to 1 EUR). All domestic LEADER associations had to manage from this fund. In the first round, the TPLA received HUF 623 million (EUR 1.7 million) and, after an interim increase, an additional amount of HUF 1.016 billion (EUR 2.8 million) for the financing of the projects it manages. Compared to the previous application cycle, this is a much smaller grant. During this period, while the domestic LEADER program received 5% of the funding, the axis 3 resources were also previously utilized through the LEADER program, which enabled the implementation of larger projects.

This downward trend in the provision of resources also has a serious impact on the association we are examining. This requires challenge and adaptability, as they aim to serve as many applicants as possible. However, as resources diminish, this ambition is hampered, and the association's work and results suffer. Therefore, it is worthwhile to be aware of the domestic situation and objectively assess the work of the TPLA.

The current amount of resources thus raised limits for the strategic planning of this period. If there is less money available, the association will be able to accept fewer submitted applications, or it will have to reduce the support quota. The TPLA chose the latter, maintaining its original objective and principle that all applications submitted to them could receive support. According to the management of the local action group, for the TPLA to be able to satisfy all the needs and aspirations of potential applicants, nearly HUF 20 billion (EUR 56 million) would be needed. However, there is little chance of such an increase in the future; hence, in the following application periods, other solutions must be sought in case of difficulties related to project financing.

If we take a closer look at the settlements receiving the most financial support per capita, most of them belong to the villages classified in less favorable groups based on our scoring. At the other end of the line, those receiving the least amount of support per capita were mainly classified into the most favorable or the favorable intermediate group. Of course, the picture is more nuanced than this because the proportion of subsidies per settlement is perhaps more closely related to the initiative, the necessary self-reliance, and the willingness of applicants than to poverty in the sense of rural development (see in Appendix Figure A2b). The figure shows the amount of financial support in HUF, that is, the total amount of support received (municipal, business, non-governmental organization [NGO]) per person. It is important to note that the spatial and temporal distributions of financial support are not related to spatial inequalities. This conclusion is discussed in more detail below.

### **Characteristics of enterprises related to rural development**

#### **Evolution of quantitative indicators of enterprises over time**

It is worth looking at the evolution of the number of businesses over time, as the more entrepreneurs there are in the area covered by the association, the more potential applicants there are to be considered. These applicants will need resources over time, along with a proper strategy and development concept. A well-prepared LAG can respond adequately to the needs received and, through the provision of basic assistance, can generate additional development ideas contributing to the growth of businesses and the region. Consequently, this helps gain the trust of more businesses.

Although the role played by the market sphere in rural development is unquestionable, only microenterprises can be supported in this program. The development of the number and the ratio of enterprises is of particular importance because it can help to predict future expansion in the range of potential applicants, and, thus, the need to raise funds in the future (see in Appendix Figure A3).

In Appendix Figure A3 illustrates an 18% increase in the number of individual businesses in 6 years. Although most settlements changed categories according to the

limit values given in the legend, a significant proportional increase can be observed in settlements further from Győr during the examined period. Relatively, many businesses operate in settlements further away from cities and smaller in terms of population, taking advantage of unfulfilled needs in certain services. This category includes flower shops, grocery stores, family bakeries, and other beauty industry service providers. In smaller villages, independent industrial enterprises are often involved in handicraft production and usually only employ one or two employees. The profile of such enterprises may include, among others, woodworking, metalworking, leatherworking, or ceramics production. Smaller food producers and processors can also be classified as independent industrial enterprises. They are in great need of LEADER's support because of their small size and the resulting small capital. After all, one of the LEADER (CLLD) principles advocates the production and sale of local products. At first, it may seem surprising that the significant increase in the number of businesses did not occur along major main roads, but in the settlements between them, which are avoided by roads with higher traffic. The objective and subjective mobility of the people living here is less; hence, their need for locally available services is greater. This phenomenon is most noticeable in the Rábaköz settlements, where, without exception, each village has a population of less than 1,000 people and is quite far from the surrounding main roads leading to Győr.

If we examine the spatial distribution of sole proprietorships, it is not surprising that the larger centers are formed along the main traffic roads. As you move away from the big city, their number naturally decreases continuously (see in Appendix Figure A4).

As a result, of several measures ensuring housing construction and family support, intense suburbanization can be observed in the settlements around the city in the last decade. Thanks to the post-suburban process, the establishment of residences was followed by jobs and services, indicating that the number of businesses also began to strongly grow. Newly established companies no longer primarily want to establish themselves in the city, but the comparative advantages offered by settlements belonging to agglomerations are much more attractive to them. The LEADER program can assist these municipalities by enhancing the municipal environment through support provision.

It is also worth examining the ratio of partnership businesses and their distribution per thousand people in the examined area. The result obtained is markedly different from that of independent enterprises, but they are also among those eligible for LEADER applications. The spatial structure formed by the number and the distribution of social enterprises indicates that the immediate surroundings of the county seat and the main traffic roads are the most attractive in terms of site selection. Moving away from Győr, their number decreases along almost concentric circles, but all of this is strongly influenced by the alignment of the main roads, where the border of these circles is slightly pushed out. This type of concentration process

is typical for most cities with agglomerations. The case of Győrújbarát can be highlighted from the evaluated spatial structure because several businesses have settled in the settlement in the recent past, thanks to local government discounts. This trend seems to continue in the near future (see in Appendix Figure A5).

The holistic spatial structure of partnership businesses in proportion to the population shows a difference that is, several settlements with outstanding values, even different from their surroundings can be identified. In the case of those located in the immediate vicinity of Győr and with greater value, the proximity to the city is decisive. In the case of settlements with lower values, the place occupied in the settlement hierarchy is the main differentiating factor. It is also possible to observe the trend that an increasing number of social enterprises are founded in settlements that are further away and offer discounts (see in Appendix Figure A6).

#### Target system of support for enterprises

In addition, to LEADER-based funding, there are many application options available to businesses, as well as to municipalities. The most notable of these are the EDIOP and Territorial and Settlement Development Operational Program (TSDOP) tenders. In accordance with expectations, environmental awareness is listed as a key element important in the process of self-development of enterprises. During the literature review, we already evaluated the importance of environmental awareness and the use of renewable energy sources. These policies are given a prominent role by the LEADER program. Businesses abide by these policies, and if possible, take advantage of the opportunities offered by such projects. In this way, they can sustainably improve their production quality. However, the two abovementioned tender types (i.e., EDIOP and TSDOP tenders) do not enjoy an advantage. As stated, the association can only support microenterprises (i.e., market participants with less than 10 employees). Companies of this size prefer to apply for LEADER and other domestic programs, such as the Hungarian Village Program and the Darányi Ignác Plan, rather than larger, all-encompassing economic development programs. The entrepreneurial questionnaires and interviews conducted with the association show that they trust LEADER and domestic programs more because they favor a transparent application process with less administration. Furthermore, the tenders are much more tailored to their needs; thus, they see greater potential in the usefulness and return of the investments. In the case of the TPLA, this is especially true because the program plans are prepared in accordance with their own proposals submitted earlier. This is certainly an advantage of the LEADER program over other programs (Gy. Horváth & T. Németh, personal communication, August 29, 2022).

#### Impact of projects on improving the quality of services and production

The effectiveness of LEADER projects can best be seen from the statements of those participating in the program because the TPLA itself does not perform a subsequent

impact assessment. The questionnaire survey showed the impact the program had on the quantity and quality of production or services. A total of six criteria were distinguished: equipment acquisition, construction within the site boundary, environmentally conscious development related to production, introduction of quality improvement systems, marketing activities, and various special services.

Among the project types, equipment procurement was the most popular, with 64% of interested respondents. This project can produce tangible results in a short period and may have additional benefits, such as a decreasing workload, an increasing production volume, or a reducing production time. The importance of the project type is substantiated by the option of multiple choices because equipment procurement is resoundingly the most important goal of many businesses, and this can be prioritized. Construction within the site boundary, which, in many cases, means plant expansion or modernization and the purchase of new equipment are closely linked to environmentally conscious development because more modern equipment can be operated with greater energy efficiency. Both project types were indicated by 18% of the respondents in the questionnaire, making them the second and third most popular projects, respectively. Marketing activities and special services were not included in the areas to be developed, the background of which is that none of the businesses is of such a size and prestige as to require the involvement of such a large amount of funds. The development and the expansion of the on-site infrastructure can also result in an increase in the number of employees; therefore, the LEADER program can also create new jobs. The TPLA formulates an ambitious goal in each application period for the creation of new jobs within the framework of either businesses or civil organizations. Thus, the association not only preserves or utilizes value, but also creates value by supporting livelihoods.

### **Role of contact systems in the action area of the TPLA**

Communication affects the activities of every association. Establishing a persistent and reciprocal relationship system with clients is also essential in the case of a grant distribution association. An important part of this is the continuous contact with the national association. The head of the work organization of the TPLA is a member of the national LEADER committee; thus, the continuous flow of information is ensured. The interview with the management pointed out a regular consultation with the local governments about ongoing projects or future plans. A quarter of the settlements are contacted on a daily basis. In general, conciliation negotiations occur on a weekly or monthly basis. Four of the association's 11 board members are mayors.

Businesses also play a key role in the cooperation, as three of the board members are self-employed, and one is in a corporate management position. The board members regularly cooperate with smaller businesses. Although less frequent, consultations with civil and church organizations are also significant. In their case,

municipalities are the second strongest partnership. Directly or indirectly, all association members are closely connected to the cooperative system just outlined. One of the TPLA's goals is to provide assistance to its members to the best of its ability, even during the planning period. Through its experience, the association can outline and provide information about the expected effectiveness, benefits, long- and short-term feasibilities, or sustainability of the selected project, as well as its stopgap or development-generating nature. All of this is also important because, in addition to avoiding the unnecessary expenditure of funds, successful or unsuccessful investments can also influence the willingness of future applicants. The TPLA also provides assistance during project implementation: it provides information on, among other things, the status of the acceptance, evaluation, acceptance of the application, or financial sourcing. All of this is necessary because if the client is uncertain due to the lack of information, they can withdraw the application before the deadline. There are associations and possibly businesses that do not maintain close relations with the local government (e.g., local hunting associations), but they do with the LEADER association. However, the truth is that these are isolated cases. For the most part, every business, civil, or church organization is connected to both the association and the local government (Figures 1 and 2) (Gy. Horváth–T. Németh, personal communication, August 29, 2022).

Figure 1

**Intensity of the relations between the LEADER association and the applicants (arrow thickness indicates the relationship intensity)**

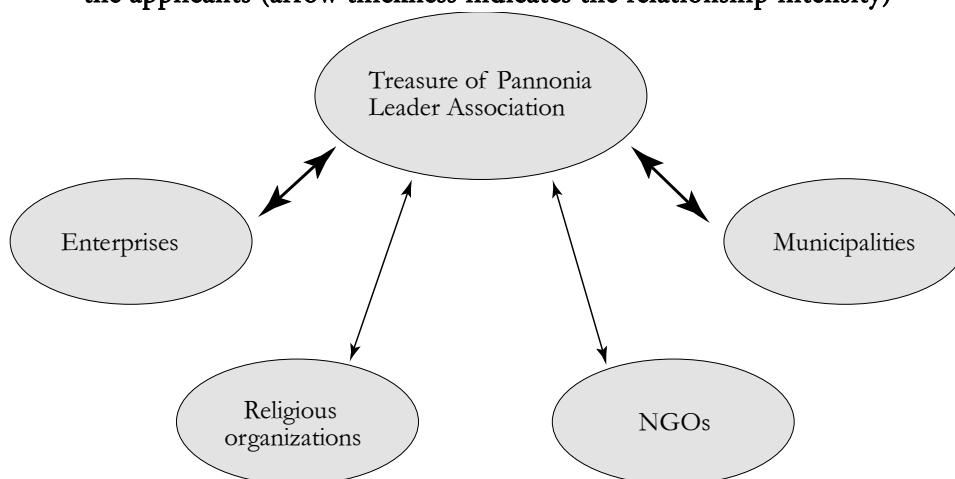
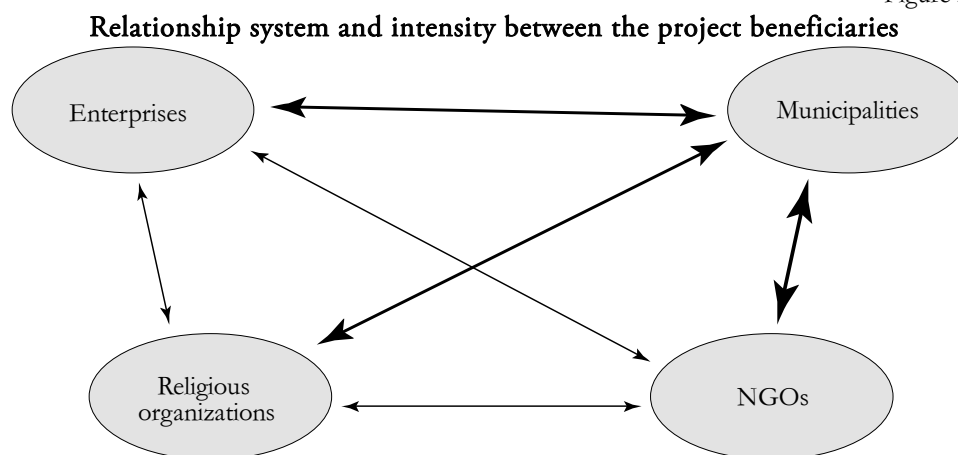


Figure 2



In Appendix Figure A7 shows that the association's relationship with the larger, developed settlements close to Győr is not the most intensive. Conversely, it cannot be concluded that isolated small villages occupy a central place in this relationship system. The association maintains an intensive relationship with Abda village, which, for example, is considered developed in the area demarcated by the TPLA, while it has an equally close link with Bakonygyirő, which is a municipality with unfavorable development indicators. The route of the main roads is also not an influencing factor because Rábacsécsény is further from main road 85, while Gyarmat village is located directly on main road 83. The distance from the TPLA headquarters (i.e., from Győr) is a determining factor in terms of building relationships because Abda is a neighboring settlement to Győr. Fenyőfő, which is farthest from the TPLA headquarters, also maintains close relations with the association. At the same time, no territorial concentration is observed between the individual groups created on the basis of a point system. It follows from all of these that the capacity and the attitude of the local government determine the quality of the relationship with the association, which also affects the willingness of applicants. If local governments consider it important to take advantage of the opportunities offered by LEADER, then that settlement builds an intensive relationship with the association. This reciprocity manifests because it is in the interest of the TPLA management to maintain the best possible relationship with all association members and clients.

## Conclusions

In relation to our first sub-goal, building on the scoring-based method, the areas with a lower population, population density, and income level, as well as the small and tiny villages of Rábaköz bordering Hanság and Sokoróalja, which are located further from the county seat, can be called resource-deficient areas. When comparing their

development indicators, they lag behind the surrounding settlements based on the characteristics of both human and physical infrastructures. The LEADER program could provide adequate assistance in their development either to local governments or to businesses, but for this, the needs of potential applicants must appear in a larger proportion. In the territorial distribution of subsidies, disadvantage is not the main differentiator, rather it is the applicant's willingness and self-reliance. The TPLA does not promote itself; hence, if the sources providing pre-financing are available, the local governments and businesses must initiate it themselves. If the required resources for the projects (greater capacity for pre-financing) are not available, these settlements will still not be able to take advantage of the LEADER program and will be forced to turn to other rural development programs, in which case, they will not necessarily be able to apply for projects that meet their needs.

The attainment of the second sub-goal allows us to conclude that the number of self-employed and joint ventures significantly increased during the examined application period. This leads to the conclusion that in the next planning period, more companies will be able to participate in the discussions and in the application submission. New businesses can formulate new demands, to which the association must adapt. The association will need more resources, as the limit on the number of applicants should also be increased. In the absence of this, reducing the amount of support allocated to individual projects can ensure that more people can participate in the projects during the examined period.

In light of the third research sub-goal, the LEADER program also provides support for microenterprises, which significantly contributes to amplifying the impact of other rural development programs. However, mainly because of a lack of confidence, local microenterprises do not show serious interest in EDIOP or TSDOP tenders. LEADER is more popular among the locals, as this kind of grassroots and decentralized program is applicant-friendly and involves less administration. Therefore, this rural development program appeared not as an additional option, but rather as an exclusive choice. This was also influenced by the fact that large-scale sectoral operational programs poorly aligned with local needs, and various aspects of the application conditions were either completely unattainable or achievable only with lower scores for rural microenterprises, such as revenue increase, payback period, and number of employees, among others.

In regard to the fourth sub-goal, according to the TPLA, the development of businesses also serves an important purpose, as they directly or indirectly raise the standard of living of the local community. The responding companies assessed the project success with positivity, as they fulfilled their expectations and generated progress in production and service provision. The association itself is not tasked with creating jobs; however, if the opportunity arises, it pays special attention to the given project and strives to achieve this goal. In the period between 2014 and 2020, a total of 12 jobs were created through LEADER projects. This was recognized by the

TPLA as a huge success and will already appear among the primary goals in the next period. This is a small result compared to the proportion of the economically active population living in the area, but it is an outstanding result for the LAG, especially when compared to other LAGs of similar size and composition. Businesses will also encourage similar developments in the future because, thanks to their experience, they already trust the application system and want to take advantage of its potential.

In achieving the fifth sub-goal, it became clear that in the case of the TPLA, the partnership network is intertwined with the communication network. The association places great emphasis on building and intensifying the contact network. Compared to the area of the TPLA and the group of applicants belonging to it, the network itself, with the exception of local governments that form a huge base, is not very extensive. There are also many potential applicant businesses, civil, and church organizations in the area of the action group, for whom the association's application system can provide a serious motivation in the future. Those who are currently part of this network receive all necessary information and assistance, from planning through the period following application submission, all the way to the submission of payment requests. The territoriality of the contact network does not show any regularity, that is, not necessarily along the route of the main roads, not close to Győr, and not the most developed or the least favorable settlements maintain an intensive relationship with the association. Rather, the relationship between the association and the local governments is deepened based on the willingness of the settlements.

Summarizing the territorial effects of the program, although economic development did not appear as a direct objective, the successes achieved in increasing efficiency and competitiveness can positively influence regional structures in the future. Therefore, the program can generate the indirect development of disadvantaged settlements located further away from the county seat, which are currently characterized by an even lower business density and/or service level.

The program may raise the question of why only 25 business project ideas were submitted to the association, while the number of businesses in the area under study is many times higher. It might be worth considering a more complex standard business development program that lists basic ideas and allows for the addition of individual needs without significantly increasing either the project scope or the resources required. The absence of such a project option could result in the LEADER program being overlooked by potential applicants and failing to attract attention without promoting itself.

Although a territorial connection between residential and economic suburbanization and the success of rural development can rightly be assumed, the positive effect of relative deconcentration on certain indicators is not worth considering in the 2014–2020 period. Rather, it will be worthwhile to wait for the strengthening of the effect of the established pattern on LEADER in connection with the tenders of the next period. Within the examined area, the settlements most

affected by post-suburban processes and economic suburbanization are those close to the county seat (located to the south and southeast of it), located along roads 82 or 81, and characterized by good infrastructure (Hardi 2002).

However, in the examined program, only microenterprises can be supported, in which case, a significant proportion increase can be observed in settlements further from Győr. These settlements are sparsely affected by suburbanization. Therefore, the growing number of small businesses can foreshadow the significant future activity shown in rural development applications in the case of settlements located southwest of Győr, as well. At the same time, the application success of strong local governments can also be significant, and the tendency can be observed of businesses founded in settlements that are further away, but offering discounts or have plots of land for sale. Therefore, the future impact of LEADER subsidies and the relationship between rural development and suburbanization is more complex than we might think at first, directing increased attention to the settlements in the west of the examined area, possibly further away from Győr.

## Appendix

Figure A1

### Leader action groups and the study area location in Hungary

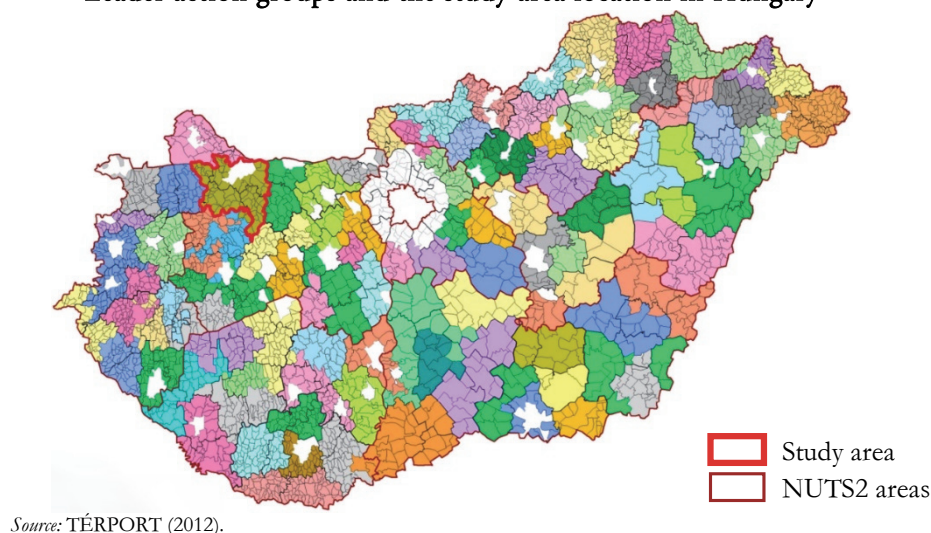
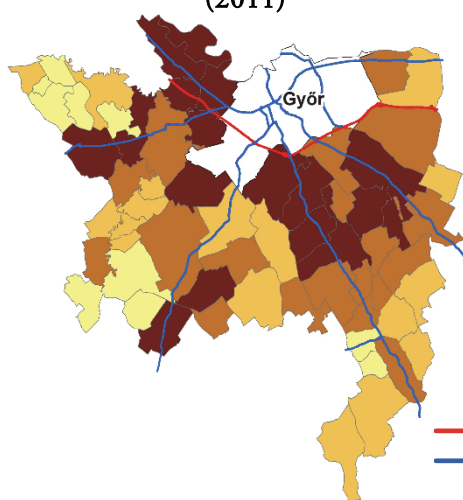
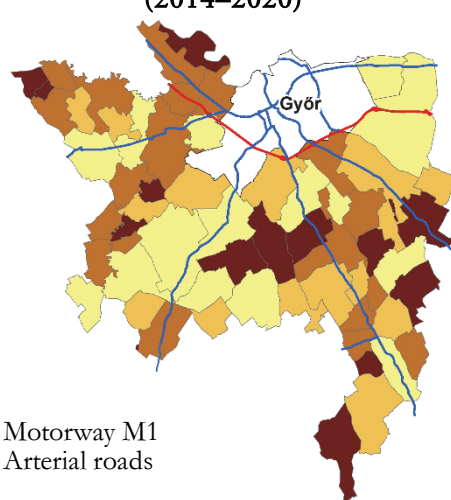


Figure A2

#### a) Multidimensional territorial types created using the scoring method (2011)



#### b) Distribution of financial support per capita (2014–2020)



Territorial type [average value]

Most unfavorable	[1.0–1.6] (10)
Unfavorable, intermediate	[1.7–2.3] (17)
Favorable, intermediate	[2.4–3.0] (19)
Most favorable	[3.1–3.8] (16)

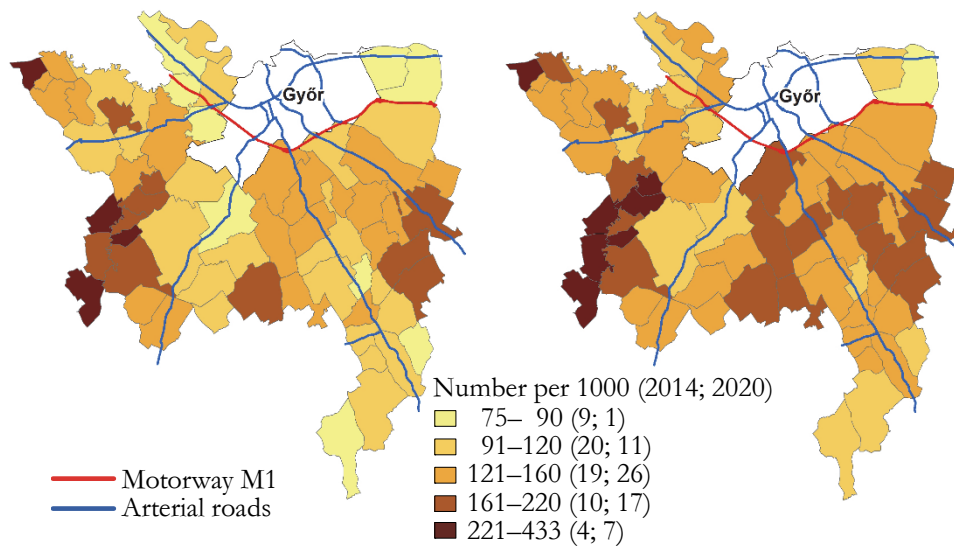
HUF

0– 6,000	(16)
6,001– 10,999	(14)
11,000– 20,000	(19)
20,001–204,244	(13)

Data source: HCSO (2011), TPLA (2016).

Figure A3

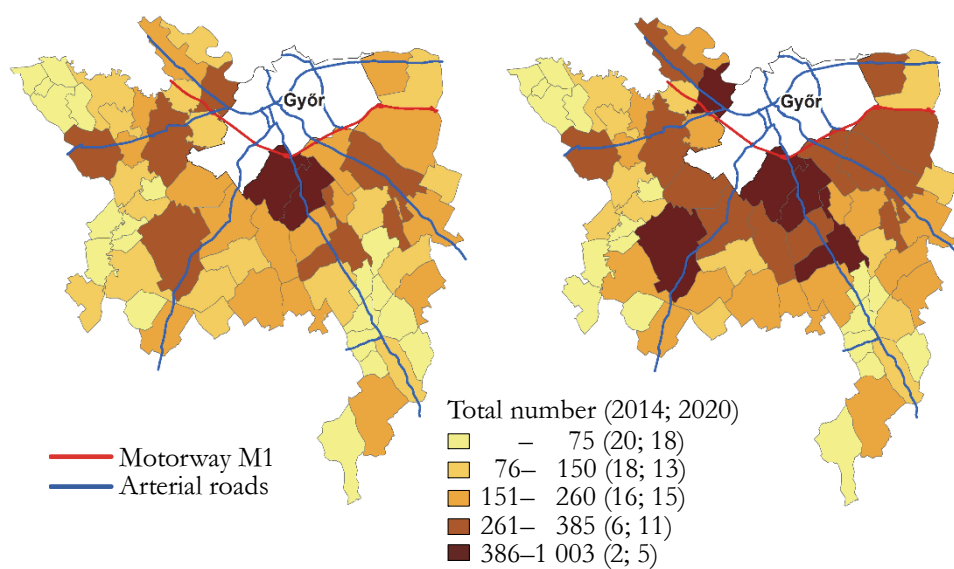
### Percentage of registered sole proprietorships per thousand people



Data source: HCSO (2014, 2020).

Figure A4

### Regional distribution of sole proprietorships



Data source: HCSO (2014, 2020).

Figure A5

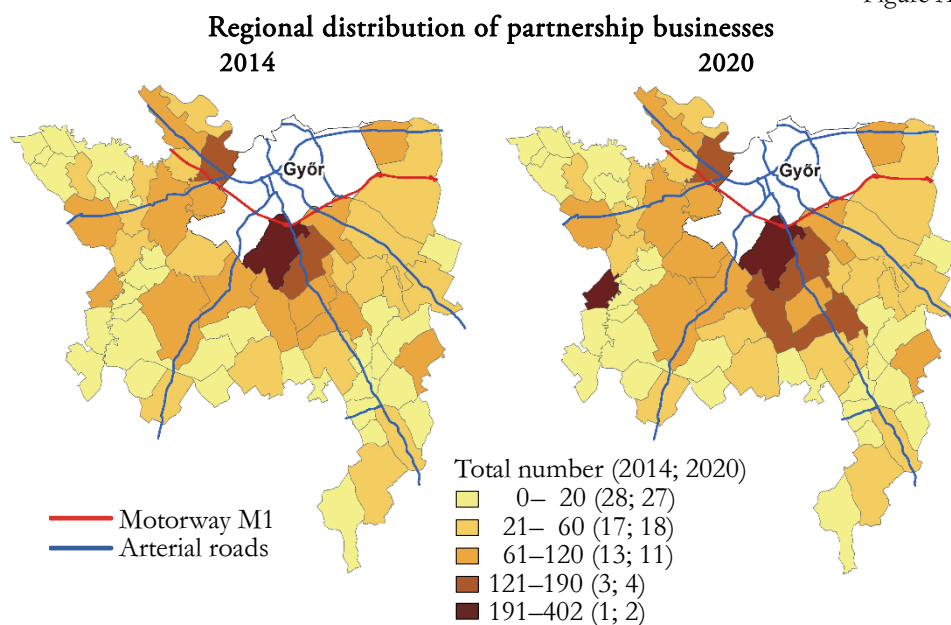


Figure A6

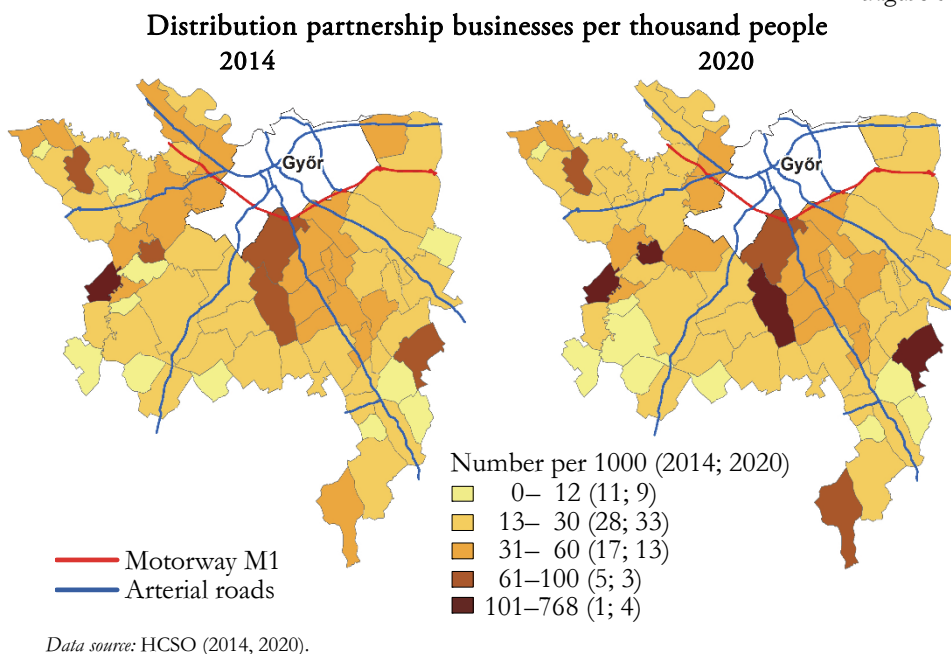
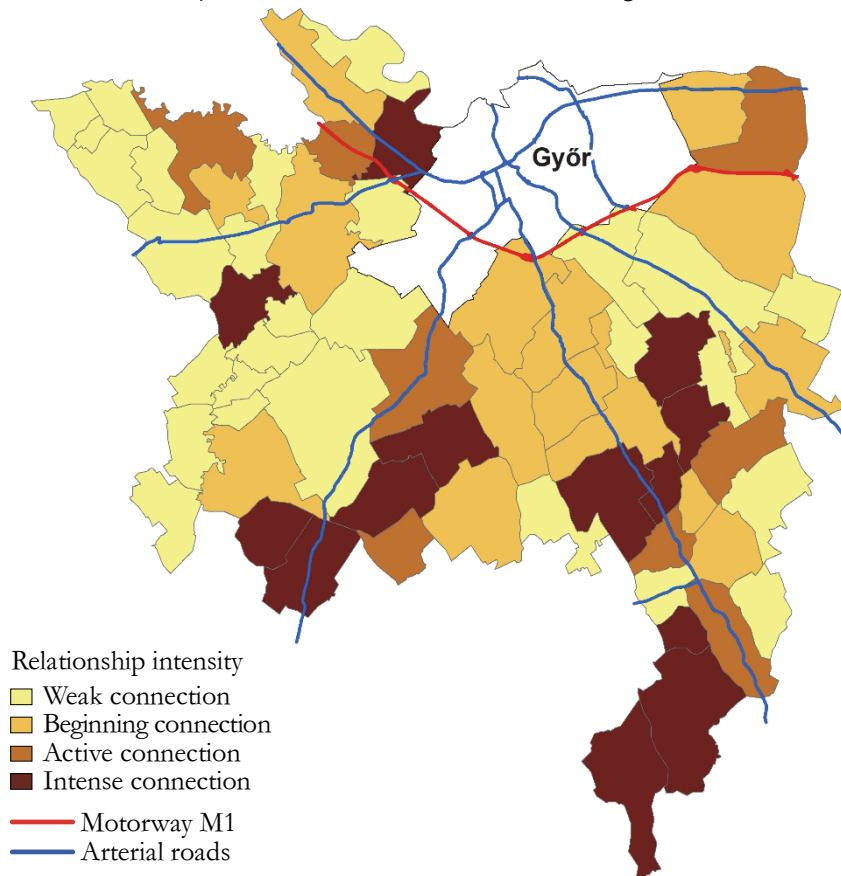


Figure A7

**Intensity of the TPLA's contact with local governments**

Source: TPLA's oral communication (Tamás Németh, association leader).

## Annex

### Main structural elements of the questionnaire used

**1** Has the company applied for renewable energy or alternative energy projects from among the applications submitted by the Treasure of Pannonia Leader Association? Yes/No

If yes and if successful, to what extent has the cost-effectiveness of the enterprise improved? Please rate on a scale from 1 to 6.

1 = Not improved

6 = Markedly improved

1	2	3	4	5	6

Please explain your choice. ....  
.....  
.....

**2** Has the company applied for projects to modernize or renew industrial, commercial or service buildings? Yes / No

If yes, and to what extent has it contributed to the development of production? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 6.

1 = Not improved

6 = Markedly improved

1	2	3	4	5	6

Please explain your choice. ....  
.....  
.....

**3** Has the company bid for projects that supported the purchase of new equipment and machinery? Yes/No

What was the purpose of these purchases?.....

What type of improvements were made? Quality improvement/Quantity improvement

**4** Did the company apply for any of the projects for business development? Yes/No

If yes, for which of the following types?

For services/Environmental improvement linked to production/Investment in construction, renovation, and extension within the boundaries of a site/Purchase of equipment/Introduction of quality improvement systems/Marketing activities/Other, namely:

If you have been awarded one of these, how much improvement have you seen? Please rate on a scale from 1 to 6.

1 = Not improved

6 = Markedly improved

1	2	3	4	5	6

Please explain your choice. ....  
 .....  
 .....

**5** Have you applied for projects to enter into contracts with vocational schools to provide apprenticeships for students? Yes/No

If yes, how successful is this cooperation with schools?

.....  
 .....  
 .....

To what extent has this contributed to the development of the company's network? Please rate on a scale from 1 to 6.

1 = Not improved

6 = Markedly improved

1	2	3	4	5	6

Please explain your choice.....  
 .....  
 .....

Is the company employing former students as active workers as part of the project to create jobs? Yes/No

If no, why not?.....

.....  
 .....

**6** Has the company applied for projects to improve the infrastructure of the site? Yes/No

If yes, to what extent has it helped the development of the enterprise? Please rate on a scale from 1 to 6.

1 = Not improved

6 = Markedly improved

1	2	3	4	5	6

Please explain your choice. ....  
 .....  
 .....

**7** Has your company participated in programs to promote innovation skills? For example, business development, business management consultancy? Yes/No  
If yes, has it had a networking effect with other enterprises? Yes/No  
Have you been able to find partner companies at these conferences? Please explain in a few sentences.

.....  
.....  
.....

If yes, how closely have you been able to work with them? Please rate on a scale from 1 to 6.

1 = Weak cooperation

6 = Intensive cooperation

1	2	3	4	5	6

Please explain your choice. ....  
.....  
.....

Have you managed to get into a partnership network? Yes/No

If yes, what role does the company play there?

Please explain in a few sentences. ....  
.....  
.....

**8** If none of the project types listed above fall within the project classification applied for by the company, please specify the name and purpose of the project(s) awarded.

.....  
.....  
.....

To what extent have these projects been successful (to what extent has the area to be developed improved)? Please rate on a scale from 1 to 6.

1 = Not improved

6 = Markedly improved

1	2	3	4	5	6

Please explain your choice. ....  
.....  
.....

**9** Do you think the winning application(s) have improved the overall performance of the business? Yes/No

Please explain in a few sentences. ....  
.....  
.....

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