

3. Reading LEADER through the key features: European cases compared

In the previous sections we have tried to frame the LEADER approach on a conceptual and above all programmatic level. As has emerged from the examination of the LEADER literature and documents, it should produce a paradigm shift in rural areas, especially for marginal ones. According to the assumptions made in this study, such a change is already inherent in the key features indicated by the European Commission in view of the 2007-2013 programming cycle which was designed to lay the groundwork for this shift, increasing the potential of the LEADER approach.

On the other hand, support for this process has grown in the academic debate developing in recent years, thanks to the personal involvement in two distinct, significant international projects (Ruralwin and Ruralinnovador)⁵, that saw the participation of the main researchers on this theme from all over Europe, at this point it is possible to outline some significant experiences. These researchers have documented the regional cases with particular care, very often by using a shared comparative research method. With reference to the same programming cycle, we will now look at the research of those who have directly and indirectly made a significant contribution to the debate on LEADER and how it can be improved.

⁵ Ruralinnovador – Development programmes and rural change in the European Union: governance and lessons to share 2007-13; Ruralwin – Successes and failures in the practice of neo-endogenous rural development in the European Union (1991-2014). These projects come under two calls of Excellence from the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness, coordinated by University of Granada, Proff. E. Cejudo and F. Navarro. They involved researchers from different regions from Europe, LAGs and regional governments.

The first research compatible with the approach we are taking and also emblematic of other experiences is by Dax et al. (2016). The research is based on two case studies, Austria and Ireland, and aims to go beyond intrinsically reductionist approaches to the evaluation of rural policy. Rather than focusing on assessing impacts and outcomes, it seeks to examine and learn from the policy process itself, considering key areas of the process: governance, operational issues (conception of tools and operating modes); delivery (mode of transaction and control); and evaluation (timing, procedures, etc.) of policies affecting rural areas. These phases are fundamental because they influence the policy making that extends beyond the RDPs (of which LEADER is part).

In order to evaluate the effects of mainstreaming, this research considers Austria and Ireland, historically dynamic territories, applying a multistage qualitative method, proceeding from the initial design of LEADER to the actual implementation involving the influential actors in the process including the LAGs themselves. The research highlights the changes produced in the delivery of the programme due to the requirement of “mainstreaming” and the effects produced on the capacity of the actors to carry out innovative actions. On the basis of the analysis carried out in several phases, an evaluation is made of LEADER in the RDPs (rural development plan) of Austria and Ireland, focusing in particular on the possibilities offered in terms of social innovations in the context of neo-endogenous development.

From an institutional point of view in Austria, the provinces are responsible for LEADER, while in Ireland it is handled exclusively by the Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht (DCEGA). In Austria, the coordination role lies with the Federal Ministry of agriculture, forestry, environment and water management nationwide, while the provinces have the main task of managing the implementation of LEADER. In addition to being the service institutions, they are therefore responsible for evaluating LEADER and for allocating funds. An interesting aspect of the Austrian case is the diversity in the implementation procedures in the different provinces: in some cases there is a direct link to the regional entity, in other cases they themselves operate as regional managers

coordinating other funds. On the other hand the LAGs are responsible for the design of the local development strategy, monitoring and self-assessment.

In the implementation of policies and governance there is a substantial difference between Ireland and Austria. In Ireland there is a centralized political organization with the Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs (DCEGA) as the main managing authority. Although the institutional and administrative structure is different, the case studies reveal many common elements regarding the effects of LEADER mainstreaming. The study highlights the major challenges facing local managers, growing concerns in programme delivery versus the preconditions for mainstreaming, showing a gap between the potential of rural activities and the support of innovative ideas, in the concrete capacity to implement the potential under the current regulatory system.

The operating rules established at national and provincial level on the basis of EU regulations have produced greater administrative complexity, with the increase in the levels of bureaucracy and extra auditing both at national and provincial level generating a series of negative effects, not only in terms of delivery times for results and the actual starting of the process, as well as in terms of less time and resources dedicated to community development. An important element regarding the Austrian case is that, compared to the previous period, the strategies corresponded less to the original guidelines of the LEADER approach. The evidence showed a large shortfall in continuing support for local development. In particular, where RDPs are mainly governed by the agricultural sector, the projects focused on standard measures, resulting in less concentration on innovative cooperation projects, thus highlighting the fact that LEADER has tended to lose its bearings in terms of multisectoral support and public assistance.

For both Austria and Ireland, with regard to the innovative character of the LEADER method, there is a sort of trivialization of projects, making standardized low-risk projects grow at the expense of more creative high-risk projects. Another important element concerns the decision-making process. Although the LEADER method should have been based on a

bottom-up approach, in reality the increase in regulations and constraints established upstream have crushed the autonomy of the LAGs, reducing their capacity. LEADER's mainstreaming has therefore made it more difficult for local actors to work with the flexibility required by the approach and the ability to respond to local needs, also limiting innovative potential, in this case negating the original ethic of the LEADER approach.

The more complete integration of LEADER into the RDPs has moved the programme towards the center of influence of rural policy, with reduced effects on rural society. Another important aspect concerns the application and effects of the LEADER method, which in fact depends on the authorities responsible for its implementation both at national and provincial level.

The implications of mainstreaming the LEADER method also concern local innovation. In particular, the bottom-up approach, support for social innovations and local actions are all threatened, bringing into question the original aim of a territorial rather than sectoral orientation. In practice in both case studies there was a tendency towards centralization which created difficulties for innovative mechanisms of coordination and cooperation. Rigid coordination, hierarchical structures and mentalities, as well as rigorous mechanisms of control and auditing have reduced the innovative character of the local intervention.

The second evaluation research is by Belliggiano et al., 2020 and discusses the mainstreaming of LEADER and the opportunity to integrate the participative, bottom-up approach into the European programmes. The comparative study involving Spain and Italy reveals interesting aspects: the subordination of rural development policy to agricultural policy is believed to have generated a lack of autonomy of local and regional rural development authorities with respect to Community procedures; excessive bureaucracy and incomplete CAP reforms have bolstered the influence of traditional centres of power, slowing down the innovation process in rural areas.

The research analyzes the role attributed to agriculture in Spain and Italy, in order to verify whether actual change has taken place, in

particular whether the objectives pursued were of mere economic performance or were designed to give a different role to agriculture taking into account the complex dynamics of rural areas. The analysis of the expenditure commitments for the single measures and actions indicate the persistence of a traditional approach mainly based on economic goals and production.

Confirmation of this can be found in the measures linked to innovation, where the reference is essentially to modernization within traditional trajectories of linear growth, while at the same time diminishing the role of multifunctionality and participation. The research also highlighted a trend in all regions of both countries in the role attributed to structural measures, which can guarantee greater volumes of expenditure, are easy to implement and offer tangible, visible results to satisfy the policy framework.

There are underestimated or neglected measures in particular concerning training and technical assistance, of fundamental importance in preparing the actors to initiate meaningful changes. This has also generated an underestimation of the bottom-up approach, in fact in many Italian regions the approach was predominantly technocratic and normative. The asymmetries regarding the allocation of resources between the various axes can also be attributed to the national coordination. Centralizing the processes is seen to have produced little attention to practices from the bottom, also opening up conflicts on the local scale. Although more horizontal measures were established in the Spanish case, unfortunately they lack integration and their implementation is incomplete. The sectoral approach would seem to have maintained its predominance in rural development policy and this is confirmed by the direction in which some axes and measures have drifted.

These trends can also be explained as being due to the strong representation and the weight attributed to some actors, such as agricultural organizations within the steering and monitoring committees. Finally, rural development policy is not yet fully innovative on the social level, being anchored to traditional and hierarchical practices, thus negating the original nature of the LEADER method.

The third research study conducted by Lacquement and Chevalier (2016) for Central Europe analyses the ways in which the LEADER programme represents an institutional novelty in the former socialist countries, as it is intended to contribute to innovating the modes of governance on a local scale. In this way, the diffusion of innovation can be understood as the ability of local actors to establish new partnerships, support and promote cooperation networks, define areas of intervention and action as interpreted in the perspective of the LEADER approach. It is precisely thanks to these processes that strategies are devised and implemented through concrete projects.

LEADER's action takes place along two dimensions: spatial and social. From a spatial point of view it involves the network of LEADER regions that constitute the areas of application of the development strategies, whose perimeters are defined by the LAGs. The latter also have a fundamental role from a social point of view as they are responsible for the devising and implementation of development strategies. According to the authors, considering LEADER as a process of social innovation means focusing on the new modes of governance of local territories in Europe and on their learning, particularly in post-socialist countries, starting specifically from the prerogatives of the bottom-up approach.

In fact, the full and effective involvement of local actors in cooperation networks is essential in order to design and implement development projects, generating new territorial management practices that should therefore take the monopoly on management away from central institutions and administrations.

The application of the LEADER programme in post-communist countries is therefore interesting because it allows us to evaluate the effectiveness of territorial reforms launched since the collapse of the 1990s. In these territories the application of the LEADER programme is of great importance as an instrument for transformation of local governance. This study, using a comparative approach, aims to understand the spatial dimensions of innovation, trying to explain the favourable conditions for the genesis of local action. The territories considered are Hungary and the new German Länder (the eastern part of federal Germany following the

1990 process, consisting of the five eastern Länder, considered in their contemporary context), in order to explore the possible effects of the context on the application of the LEADER programme as a social process of innovation. Using the analytical tools of structural sociology, cooperation networks are analysed and an interpretation is sought especially in the way in which they relate to the local territory.

It is assumed that the spread of this form of innovation derives from a transfer of public policies into the framework of the process of Europeanization. As regards the implementation, the intervention perimeters have been mapped and the different logics of programme application analysed. From the comparative approach it emerges that innovation practices are differentiated and that learning the LEADER approach is part of a territorialized process. As regards the first aspect, the LEADER intervention concerns the modality of public action within the EU and its territorial structuring in which multiple actors on different scales are involved, often generating complex negotiations and articulations. The diffusion of the LEADER approach is essentially based on the contractualisation of the three levels of EU, national state and LAGs that frame the transfer process.

Regarding this aspect, the national rural development plans were analysed in the research, in particular in the application part of LEADER, as they influence the decision-making processes and the planning of strategies on a local scale. It is interesting to see the analysis conducted on the most relevant LEADER Axis measures in each State from which four dominant national models of rural development design emerge (Figure 3).

As shown in figure 3, in most European countries the priority measures are aimed at improving the rural economy, and in particular at supporting the development of non-agricultural activities and competitiveness oriented towards tourism enhancement. In post-socialist countries in Central Europe, the priorities seem very different as they are aimed at improving the quality of life. This is a strategic choice which may be due to the poor endowments of rural municipalities for which financial investments are in this case more necessary than elsewhere and to a still very agro-centered concept of rural development for which LEADER

intervenes to support the national government. Considering the constraints on the area of intervention, a homogeneous distribution can be observed, largely falling within pre-existing cooperation networks, especially in Hungary. The study shows that although the transfer of public policies from the EU offers Member States a fair margin of maneuver that allows them to adapt the LEADER instrument to the logic of action, their institutional structures, actors and cultural factors condition the modalities of reception and application of European policies, producing different patterns and degrees of adaptive action, leading to a distinction between a logic of support and a logic of intervention.

In Germany, the implementation of the LEADER program was delegated to the Länder in accordance with a decentralized procedure. This has also meant a form of restoration of local self-government through the mobilization of new forms of skills, which has entailed a reorganization of services and personnel, completely changing the way of conceiving the management of local space.

In Hungary, the implementation of the program is instead managed by a state agency dependent on the Ministry of Agriculture. The coverage of LEADER in this case follows the administrative network, therefore the form taken by LEADER here assumes a centralistic and controlling character at a micro-regional level, which becomes the level of management of public services and equipment.

As regards the logic of support and intervention, these aspects are expressed in the way the LAGs are constituted. Therefore the composition of the partnerships and their method of structuring affect local development action. The analysis carried out on specific case studies reveals two different situations. The first is in one of the five new German Länder. The method of composing the partnership clearly reflects the concern for institutional and territorial balance, with privileged roles for certain political actors and figures from the corporate world. The second case concerns a LAG in Hungary. In this case, the training of the LAGs was characterized by a long, complex procedure which was piloted by the managing authority. The two situations are very different as regards the decentralization and transfer of functions.

Figure 3. Priority objectives of the LEADER program (2007-2013) in the European Union.



Source: Lacquement and Chevalier, 2016, p. 71.

However, in both cases the rigid question of representativeness has often led to the participation becoming merely ostensible. In fact, the presence of token representatives of the three sectors does not always lead to actual involvement. In fact, the analysis of the links between the actors

within the cooperation network is fundamental in understanding the actual structuring of the local system. The adoption of the structuralist postulate, according to which the functioning of social networks does not depend on the sum of the relationships that are established between individuals but on the nature of these relationships, highlights the importance of forming a matrix of social resources that represents added value for action and share capital.

In the German LAG, a greater density and connection of interpersonal relationships is observed, and the network of relationships is weakly hierarchical, although there are subjects who polarize the system of mutual knowledge more than others. In the Hungarian LAG, the integration between the network members is rather weak due to the lack of knowledge between the actors. Some figures, who thanks to this mutual knowledge become a polarizing force, are well trained in rural development, and constitute a very small local elite who therefore seem to be the only ones to master the LEADER system.

The network of relations therefore appears polarized around some central actors. However, much depends on the ability of these actors and here the example of the German LAG is emblematic. In fact, the central actors in this case are small farmers located in a mountainous and peripheral area. Paradoxically, therefore, the initiative and involvement do not come from the center to the periphery but from the periphery to the center. This is an interesting situation because it involves a dynamic local company within which there are a range of figures, from the managers of the development missions to the promoters of the business incubator.

The territorial reform has also given them greater autonomy in the area of inter-municipal cooperation structures. This network of pioneers is therefore the core around which a series of operations have been structured including the spatial distribution of development projects. Although also in this case the participatory approach appears polarized, nevertheless the density of interpersonal ties around the central actors has allowed the expression of a proactive planning force for the benefit of the entire territory. The situation of the Hungarian LAG is different. In this case, a strong polarization emerges around a network dominated by

members of the local elite. In fact, confirmation comes from the municipal distribution of the projects which is asymmetrical, reflecting the demographic and economic imbalances between the two regions. In this case, the participatory approach is also limited, being practically in the hands of the central actors, and the fragmentation of interpersonal ties within the network brings benefits only for some municipalities.

These entities, taking as intermediaries the associations placed under their protection, are responsible for defining and in some cases reinventing the local cultural identity starting from a museographic approach to local resources. This way of proceeding greatly inhibits civic learning. In addition, the involvement of other actors within the LAG is quite low, and the same situation is found in collective actions and projects where inevitably the level of participation is very low, usually reduced to information or communication, producing very strong social marginalization effects. Only some actors therefore have the possibility of mobilizing their know-how and their relationships to access information and be included in the processes.

This study on Central Europe highlights the presence of a causal link between the relative involvement of individuals in the collective process and the configuration of spatial structures. The functioning of LAGs is highly dependent on the effects of the place. The implementation of LEADER seems to depend on the geographical context, since spatial factors influence social interplay, with the strategies developed by the social actors depending on specific properties of the places and the organization of space. In the long term, the methods of applying territorial reforms and the transfer of prerogatives to local levels certainly affect coordination and local action and therefore the local process.

The last research examines Finland and makes a comparative study with Spain on a crucial measure in the context of neo-endogenous development, Transnational cooperation. In order to have a comprehensive picture of the situation in Finland we have looked at two research studies. The first is the report commissioned by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry during the programming period of the European Union 2007-2014 and focuses on Finland (Pylkkänen et al., 2015), the

second study is a comparison between Finland and Spain (Navarro et al., 2020).

Cooperation, as we have said, is one of the key features of the LEADER approach. Indeed, it should generate new knowledge and ideas and promote reciprocal learning between different territories. The report on Finland examined in particular detail the implementation, results and impacts of the TNC activities, as well as examples of good practices and expectations. Comparisons were also made with the previous programming cycle through interviews with managers, project materials and various documents.

At the programmatic level, cooperation is included in the LEADER 421 action: Interregional and transnational cooperation. The projects are thus divided into two groups: regional Inter-territorial cooperation and Transnational cooperation (TNC). In particular, the analysis considers only the second type, of wider and more impactful projects.

These are complex co-planning activities that require skills but also a mutual financial commitment. The first distinctive feature in Finland is the presence of a preliminary feasibility study that envisages the finding of potential partners, planning the project and preparing the next phases. Very often this is in fact linked at the local level to undertake targeted actions. The LAG is generally better prepared and more qualified to support external TNC projects, if it also has its own long-term international cooperation and the know-how accumulated and a strong social base.

More specifically, 94 operative TNC projects and 86 preparatory projects were accounted for in the last programming period. The first interesting aspect to emerge is that the projects are focused on development issues in general, especially on young people, tourism and culture rather than economic entities. A deeper analysis then reveals that the typical candidates were associations and non-profit organizations. In 2007-2013, young people proved to be a key target group in almost one out of three projects, the main themes were culture, tourism and, in general, local development issues. As far as the partners are concerned, the situation has changed to some extent. During the LEADER + period,

project partners were most often found in Italy, Ireland and Scotland, for the next period 2007-2013 most of the project partners were found in Estonia, Sweden and France probably due to the economic crisis.

Overall, Finland is considered one of the most active Member States in Europe in particular in the field of TNC cooperation and indeed it experienced significant growth between the two programming periods.

On a European scale, the international cooperation activity of Finnish action groups is high compared to other Member States. Indeed, the Finnish LEADER Action Groups play a leading role as the main partner of TNC projects with significant impacts. This marked dynamism and international openness are due to various factors connected in particular to the role of the promoters, their ideas and the strength of the networks.

The most common starting point for projects was the presence of existing ideas and strong networks among the promoters. The role of the LAG has become central due to several factors thanks to the presence of specific figures (the TNC coordinator or the qualified correspondent) with in-depth knowledge, generating a clear positive impact on the level and continuation of TNC activities. In fact, these features made it possible to overcome the major problems encountered in other European countries (as in the case of Spain) in particular legal and linguistic skills and versatile training courses and activities to support networking.

The role of the LAG becomes significant through the presence of many components, including an adequate development strategy, previous relevant project activities, the involvement of the LAG in international projects or in events where cooperation with European "twin groups" has been established and deepened, the presence of an organization in the background, and the presence of relevant contacts and cooperation networks, the latter being fundamental for starting cooperation projects. The availability of adequate technical support has also represented an important added value of the Finnish LAGs. Another fundamental element in their success is that they start from the enhancement of consolidated networks but also expand them in search of new partners.

The projects have produced a significant baggage of experience for their beneficiaries and promoted many types of mutual learning. Based on the

analysis carried out, the projects have produced important impacts, enabling learning, promoting enthusiasm and often the transfer of ideas or models from one location to another, also affecting long-term local skills and practices.

One of the main problems was planning, particularly in relation to the different timing of research opportunities in the different Member States. Another aspect in which Finland differs from the other states is the greater flexibility and decision-making autonomy of Finnish LAGs. In fact, compared to the others, they decide on the financing of TNC projects and also on the choice of partners. The application process is in fact much simpler, and there is continuous assistance to support the international project process, with the Executive Director and the staff of the LAG very often providing significant local support in their area.

If we consider the assessment of impacts, although there are no adequate indicators to assess intangible ones, based on the information gathered in the study the Finnish projects provided a significant amount of results and experience, as well as promoting a wide range of learning. Cooperation projects have had a significant impact in terms of knowledge, new ideas and the transfer of operating models for the development of the local area to other areas. Such projects have often had significant economic impacts that could not be foreseen from the start. The cooperation created in the projects has usually led to further projects, some of which are currently underway, or has involved the same partners in new project initiatives. An important element of these international projects is the anchoring to the local strategy, in fact the international project favors openness, amplifies the results and creates new opportunities at the local level.

Certainly, international project processes require supranational regulation of varying complexity from country to country. In fact, in the comparison with Spain, for example, problems emerge that concern shortcomings of the context that cannot easily be changed in the short term such as lack of experience, know-how, skills, coordination skills, and the presence of relevant actors and local networks familiar with international cooperation. Finnish rural areas are generally prosperous,

with high levels of productivity, employment and are marked by high participation. In fact rural policy has achieved excellent results in coherence with sectoral policies targeting rural areas. The main strengths of this rural policy are: the participation of civil society and universities in the preparation, implementation and evaluation of projects, the intelligent use of EU funds to build its rural policy by adopting the LEADER approach (this country being considered a model in its implementation), the highly successful application of the pre-existing network of volunteers in the municipalities, integration of LEADER with other national and EU funds, an extensive participation in LAGs, as well as their considerable autonomy (Navarro et al., 2020).

Although the impacts have been different and obviously more evident in Finland than in Spain due to the factors we have mentioned, it has been found that most of the effects obtained after the implementation of the TNC are intangible and, in many cases subjective. Examples are the creating of "contacts and networks" between LAGs, various local actors, entrepreneurs and young people in different fields; the increase of experience, skills, knowledge, group skills and training; contacts between institutions and local inhabitants; new ways of doing and thinking not previously contemplated; greater experience and ability to act in collaboration; the acquisition of skills through "learning by doing", "learning by building" and mutual learning; relations with other cultures, institutional and collective learning through a better understanding of common problems and the development of ideas, concepts and systems; the emancipation of local inhabitants and their involvement in the processes of decision making; building new partnerships, associations and relationships; resolving social conflicts and generating debate on the issue. Other more economic effects concern the ability to generate new business opportunities, projects and initiatives, and the creation of jobs (Navarro et al., 2020).

Table 2. Key features of LEADER through main issues in EU cases.

Key features	Main issues or assets (2007-2013)			
	Austria Ireland	Italy Spain	Hungary Germany	Finland Spain
Area-based local development strategies	Reduced involvement of rural community Process technicalization (administrative and bureaucratic complexity) caused by low community development	Low level of participation Process technicalization (administrative and bureaucratic complexity)	Low level of participation and token representation Participatory approach polarized (much more in Hungary) Low participation produces asymmetrical imbalances More leeway for strategies, increasing marginalization Museographic approach to local resources	High level of participation of civil society and universities Continuity with previous experiences
Bottom-up approach	Mainly centralized approach Rigid coordination, Hierarchical structures Regulations and constraints Rigid regulatory system	Centralized power of a few actors Hierarchical structures Traditional approach mainly based on production Regulations and constraints Rigid regulatory system Technocratic, top-down normative approach Centralized processes	Institutional structures, actors and cultural factors condition reception and application of European policies Decentralized procedure promotes new forms of skills, and management of local space (Germany). Centralized procedure: LEADER has a centralistic and control character at micro - regional level (Hungary)	Mainly decentralized Autonomy, involvement of different actors, mainly bottom-up processes

<p>Local actions groups</p>	<p>Low autonomy Reduced capacity and autonomy Low flexibility Reduced ability to respond to local needs</p>	<p>Low investment in education and training Reduced capacity and autonomy</p>	<p>Pioneers' ability and dynamism essential influence on strategies and projects Density of interpersonal relationships influences proactive planning power for the benefit of the entire territory. LEADER implementation depends on geographical context</p>	<p>Responsible for initiating cooperation projects Choosing partners and managing the procedural steps High skills Previous experience Local support skills Confidence/personal relationships Trust between LAGs</p>
<p>Cooperation and networking</p>	<p>Low coordination and cooperation</p>	<p>Low coordination and cooperation</p>	<p>Networks sensitive to the effects of places and contexts Quality of relationships important in social networks Knowledge and trust between actors (social capital) important for density of long term relationships, strategies and implementation (quality, inclusiveness) Spatial factors influence social interplay and strategies</p>	<p>Strong network of actors and relationships on a local and international scale Dynamic and open networks Creation of "contacts and multidisciplinary networks" (various fields) Equal position in power</p>

Innovation	Limited innovative potential Trivialization of projects, standardized, low-risk projects	Technical, traditional innovation Limited innovative potential Standardized low-risk projects	Innovation seen in local actors' ability to organize partnerships, cooperation networks and to establish areas of intervention Development projects of common interest, few commercial ones	Innovation is understood in a broader sense Projects focus on intangible resources and broad themes such as local development
Integrated and multisectoral approach	Sectoral connotation Standard measures Low innovative cooperation projects Low multisectoral approach	Sectoral connotation Standard measures Low innovative cooperation projects Low multisectoral approach Standardized results and measures	Involvement of individuals in the collective process directly related to configuration of space	International projects built with particular attention International projects strongly attached to enhancing the local resources and actors Integrated, relational, open strategies

Our elaboration based on Dax et al., 2016; Belligiano et al., 2020; Lacquement and Chevalier, 2016; Pylkkänen et al., 2015; Navarro et al., 2020.