

#### **4. Reading LEADER through the key features: the regional case of Puglia**

The international cases have revealed significant features in common, essentially related to the difficulties of adapting and implementing LEADER on a local level. While from the programmatic point of view the interpretation of the key features is clear, it is on the local level that problems emerge. There are persistent critical aspects in the style and processes of governance and planning adopted. What emerges is a traditional, productivist approach which has revealed important critical issues in the implementation of the initiative on a local scale. Therefore, in order to explore what happens locally and to conclude the analysis we will now focus on a regional case.

Within the European regulatory framework, each Managing Authority, following the general guidelines set out in the national strategic plan, was able to structure the LEADER approach at its discretion, in relation to the general guidelines of its programme. In Italy this situation has led to a rather heterogeneous interpretation of the LEADER method. In this context, Puglia, a representative regional case during the 2007-2013 programming cycle, is analysed for the implementation of LEADER. The region is located in the South of Italy and belongs to the convergence objective regions of the 2007-2013 cycle (Figure 4).

In this predominantly marginal region in Southern Italy, which can be seen in figure 5, the LEADER axis played a leading role in 2007-2013 development planning. The amount of resources allocated was well above not only the percentage indicated by the EU (about 5%) but was also the

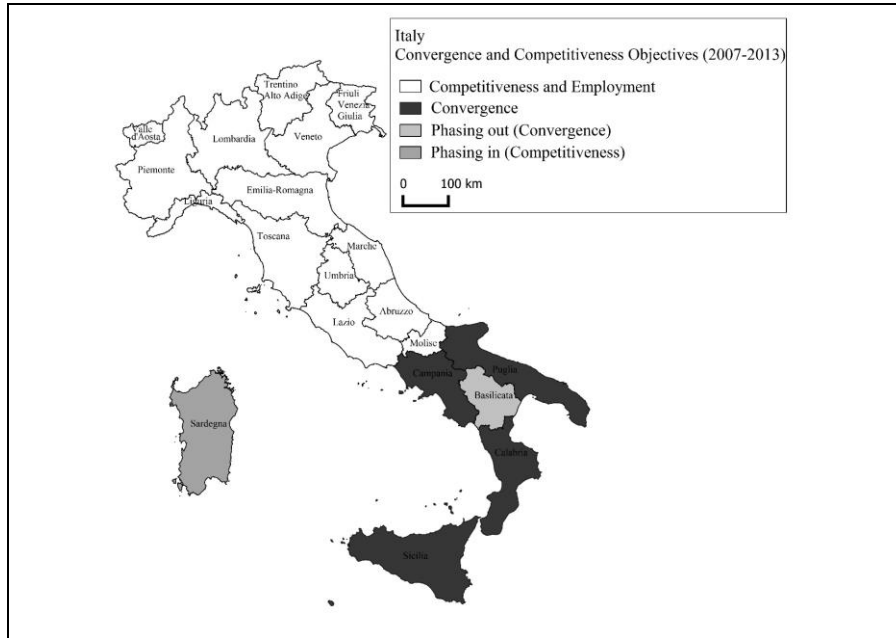
highest on a national scale (Figures 6-7), affecting the entire regional territory with the involvement of 25 LAGs, in this case higher than the national average (De Rubertis, 2013; De Rubertis et al., 2015; Labianca, 2016).

In national terms the region is characterized by a high rate of experimentation especially in recent years (Espon, 2013; De Rubertis, 2010; 2013; Labianca, 2014b; 2016; Profeti, 2006; Fighera, 2014), due to a capacity for cooperation and dynamism over time particularly concentrated in specific areas (MIPAAF, 2010; De Rubertis, 2013; De Rubertis et al., 2014; Labianca, 2014a; 2014c) and the strategic role assigned to Axis 4. It thus became a sort of emblematic pilot experience.

In 2005 the region initiated strategic planning experiences that would have a particularly innovative impact on the territory due to a long, significant experience in LEADER, and the role that this has assumed especially in the 2007-2013 programming cycle (among others see De Rubertis, 2010; 2013; Labianca, 2014b; 2016).

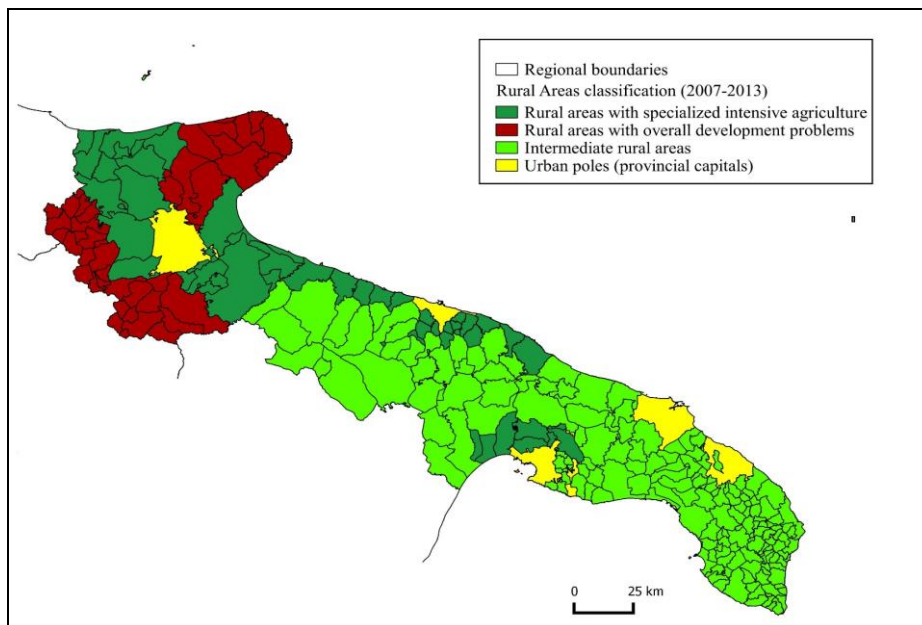
While on the one hand the latest reform of the CAP considerably simplified the programming of rural development policy from a financial point of view, on the other hand it introduced various elements of complexity through the LEADER method. From being a pilot scheme, the community initiative program has been brought back within the RDP, constituting Axis 4, thereby requiring new implementation procedures which, as we have said, have been greatly affected not only by the political, institutional and economic context but in particular by the social setting. As a predominantly rural region, the area has been progressively involved in the implementation of rural development policy since the 1990s, and in the 2007-2013 cycle it reached a high number of LAGs, covering the entire regional territory with the exception of the urban poles (De Rubertis, 2010; 2013; De Rubertis et al., 2014; Labianca, 2016) (see Figure 5).

**Figure 4. Italy: regional classification under 2007-2013 programming cycle.**



Source: Labianca, 2016.

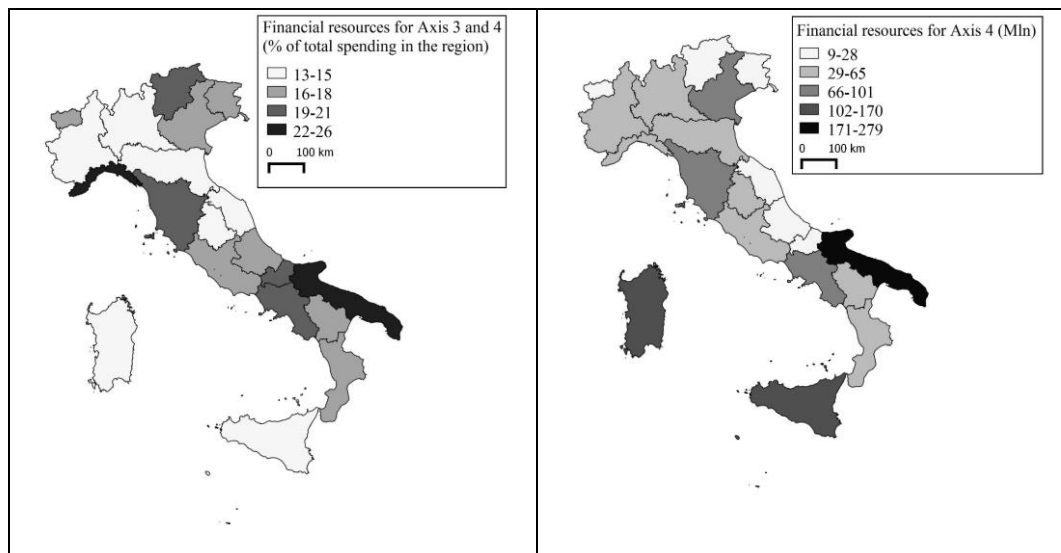
**Fig. 5. Puglia: rural areas classification.**



Source: Our elaboration.

**Figure 6. Financial resources for Axis 3-4.**

**Figure 7. Financial resources for Axis 4.**



Source: Labianca, 2016.

In the cycle in question, 25 LAGs were set up to cover the entire regional territory, with some cases where previous experiences were enhanced (such as the Territorial Pacts, ITPs and SIPs). In fact, it was only in some of these cases (such as the area of the Monti Dauni) that the actors involved maintained stability and continuity over time) (De Rubertis, 2013). The analysis conducted in recent studies has made it possible to detect objectives and elements of innovation compared to the past but also the criticalities and shortcomings of the experience. The LEADER initiative has assumed a key role in the Puglia region during the recent programming cycles. The region, in fact, in the first edition of the LEADER managed to complete only two initiatives, but tried to increase and extend the adoption of the instrument in the following years to include all municipalities except for provincial capitals (urban poles) (De Rubertis, 2010; 2013; De Rubertis et al., 2014; 2015; Labianca, 2016).

In the 2007-2013 programming cycle, the region, which was included in the Convergence objective, placed great trust in the approach to a greater extent than the other Italian regions. In fact, it has invested more resources in Axes 3 and 4, thus giving the territories a leading role in the

development of local strategies. Axis 3, aimed at improving the quality of life in rural areas and diversifying the rural economy, integrated with Axis 4 (LEADER) absorbed over 20% of Community funding (Ibidem) (see Figures 6-7). Moreover, investing in axes 3 and 4 had an important significance in terms of strategy. In fact, it meant giving a precise orientation through two strongly interconnected axes related to the territory in its fundamental aspects of local development and the improvement of local governance (Labianca, 2016).

Starting from these basic premises, in this phase of our study, we will try to evaluate LEADER following the key features and their manifestation, by referring to previous research and reports by the Region, in order to orient our reflections and analysis about the ongoing programming cycle, of great significance for the region.

One element concerns the bottom-up approach and the development strategy elaborated by the territories. The regulatory re-introduction of a hierarchical structure for programming activity, based on the imposition of Community Guidelines, conditioned both national and regional programming. The National Plans of the various European States in fact, instead of deriving from local needs and therefore being an expression of the various regional programmes, have been defined in a hierarchical and top-down manner, significantly reducing the innovative scope of the various urban and rural development programming tools introduced precisely in the aforementioned cycle. To this is added the conservative system of the CAP for the involvement of specific actors (Belliggiano and Labianca, 2018).

In fact, as has been argued above, although according to the LEADER approach the local strategy should have been developed using a bottom-up approach, in fact it was under the strong constraints of objectives and requirements defined upstream by the regional government. As discussed in previous research (among others De Rubertis, 2010; 2013; Labianca, 2016) this in fact has limited the action of the LAGs and greatly reduced the innovative potential of the approach, in many cases producing strategies that are inconsistent with the actual needs of the territories. In this situation, while on the one hand the LAGs were recipients of

interventions that encouraged their respective territories to carry out accounting and administrative tasks, on the other hand they enjoyed little autonomy for the launch and implementation of innovative actions and projects.

The analysis carried out on the planning documents for the period 2007-2013 also confirmed the weak role and poor integration with other planning tools in progress (such as the planning experience of the vast area). This is probably due to the marked dependence of the local strategy on national and community guidelines, thus pushing the territories to develop projects that comply with established criteria required in other settings, with the effect of reducing their innovative potential (De Rubertis, 2010; 2013; Labianca et al., 2016; Navarro et al., 2018). In fact, innovation mainly concerned the technical and production aspects, focusing to a lesser extent on improving the context from a cultural, social and institutional point of view (De Rubertis et al., 2015; Labianca, 2016; Labianca et al., 2016).

The adoption of a rather traditional productivist approach has also revealed important critical issues in the implementation of the initiative on a local scale. The entrenched nature of traditional governance models has limited the effective capacity for sectoral and territorial integration, as instead intended, thus preventing the actors from triggering real processes of change on a local scale (Labianca, 2016; Navarro et al., 2018; De Rubertis et al., 2015). Compared to traditional forms of institutionalized planning and participation, as we will see below, community visioning is characterized by more ambitious objectives regarding the development of the territory, addressing complex problems, managing the construction of alternative scenarios (the shared vision of development more anchored to the values of the entire community), through innovative and extensive consultation and concertation processes.

In this case, participation cannot be reduced to mere information, communication and consultation. Participatory processes can be understood in various ways by local authorities and the methods and procedures activated may be different, however, as emerged in the LEADER experiences analysed, it can be argued that there is a common

difficulty in sufficiently involving communities and actors. The heterogeneity of the different actors does not always contribute to raising the quality of the path undertaken, especially if they are not adequately involved and informed, or if there is no mutual knowledge and trust between them (see the Hungarian case, discussed in the previous section). On the other hand, participatory practices are very often reduced to mere information and communication activities and do not envisage effective involvement and empowerment of citizens in all phases of the process.

As discussed in some research studies (among others Belliggiano and Salento, 2014; De Rubertis, 2013; Labianca and Belliggiano, 2018; Labianca et al., 2016) particular areas of criticality emerge regarding the poor activation of participatory paths that have produced a marked standardization with opportunistic interventions and behaviours. This is accompanied by a low activation on a local scale due to reduced room for maneuver on the part of the LAGs as well as the lack of experience in the field, due to the respect of evaluation criteria inspired by technocratic practices and established at the top levels (see the international cases analysed in the previous section).

As observed (Belliggiano and Labianca, 2018), the perception of the exercise of participation is rather contradictory: on the one hand the administrators and planners of the LAGs emphasize their own participatory results in a self-referential way, simply measuring them in terms of attendance at information or orientation events in preparation for the strategy; on the other, the various economic components interested or involved, measure participation exclusively on the reception given to their own requests or at the most on the degree of sensitivity expressed by the representatives of the LAGs towards the interests they represent. It is evident that both in the first category of actors and in the second, participation is considered only in contingent terms, thus allowing for impromptu initiatives that are often “piloted” (and not facilitated) by professionals.

Among the main territorial actors there is also a widespread awareness of the scarce effectiveness of participatory processes, caused by a substantially heterodirected approach (regional programme constraints),

which reduces the practice of participation to identifying the best form of available measures, rather than creating it themselves. It is therefore a question of a partial, perhaps ostensible, preliminary participation in the process, devoid of developments and aimed solely at achieving the awards given for the presentation of final reports (Ibidem).

The scarce focus on the role of participation practices at the regional level, the lack of codified procedures and experiences represent limitations of the LAGs themselves, who unfortunately continue to perceive participation more as an imposition, than a requirement, thus not feeling the need to generate internally the skills necessary to participate constructively. The study of the interpretation of innovation on a regional scale highlights the contradiction of the Apulian experience, the original desire for change actually seems not to have been adequately supported by a real need and culture of innovation (Belliggiano and Labianca, 2018; Labianca, 2016; Labianca et al., 2016).

In addition to the low level of participation on the part of the target community of the interventions, there is little continuity with previous experiences and a weak integration/coordination with the other programming tools that exist in the same territory (De Rubertis et al., 2014; De Rubertis and Labianca, 2017; Belliggiano and Labianca, 2018; Belliggiano and Salento, 2014).

The strategies developed reflect the lack of attention to the qualitative dimension of social phenomena. In this context, it is not surprising to have found weak continuity and coherence between objectives and strategies and inadequate coordination and integration mechanisms between instruments: often the results and experiences of previous projects are canceled out by the new ones or are in evident conflict with concurrent projects or competitors. Each project identifies different territorial systems, attributes standardized identities and objectives, rarely shared with the local community (De Rubertis and Labianca, 2017). Added to this, the integrated programming experiences have been marked by high partnership turnover, fueling discontinuity and making any coordination attempt even more problematic (De Rubertis, 2010; 2013; De Rubertis and Labianca, 2017; Belliggiano and Labianca, 2018).



This perspective has led to a sectoral and predominantly productivist approach in the other Italian regions that have invested more in axis I (where resources were mainly destined to the modernization of farms and the enhancement of agricultural production), but also paradoxically in the Puglia region which instead should have avoided this pitfall due to the greater role attributed to the LEADER method. As revealed by some field studies (Belliggiano and Salento, 2014), within the LAGs the territorial coalitions often manifest horizontal and vertical imbalances and asymmetries, with difficulties in programme management that often involve the use of exogenous specialized skills, with sub-optimal results. This situation affects the participation, commitment and motivation of the endogenous components.

At the same time, the involvement of a variety of local development stakeholders and their different functional interests remain vital for the processes and outcomes of governance in rural development. As noted by Furmankiewicz and Macken-Walsh (2016) the role and functioning of partnerships depend not only on membership thresholds, which are often defined on the basis of regulations, but also on existing social environments, relationships and networks. This can be exacerbated by the use of partnership funds to promote the interests of stronger partners, as well as the low representation of the traditional local community. In this regard, in such situations of imbalance of the interests represented, the authors consider essential to support and actively strengthen the third and private sector in rural areas, not only in order to challenge established positions of power, but so that they can be recognised as legitimate representatives and contribute to greater diversity in the results of rural development. All this leads us to reflect more deeply on the dynamics of local governance, often little considered, on the qualitative thickness of the relationships rather than on the quantity of them.

In order to have further elements of evaluation we will look at some regional reports. As established by the Community Regulations (1698/2005, art. 80 ff.), the Member States are obliged to establish an annual evaluation system for their Rural Development Programme, entrusted to experts external to the administration. An interesting aspect

regards compliance with the recommendations in the common monitoring and evaluation framework based on the Community guidelines. The internal evaluation reports are an important element that both highlights the regional government's capacity for critical self-assessment with a view to improving subsequent programming, and adds useful information for the analysis of the regional case.

An interesting element emerging from the European cases analysed concerns the governance approach and the modalities of shaping the objectives established at a higher level in the programme framework which, as we have stated, inevitably conditions the implementation on a local scale. Where LAGs are allowed greater decision-making and strategic autonomy, the result is an approach closer to the LEADER method, indicated by the greater capacity for community involvement and a more extensive participation, and strategies closer to the needs of the community, capable of acting at different levels, as occurs in Finland. Contributing to this assessment of the regional case is the Report drawn up in 2012 on the degree of "Leaderability" in Puglia.

This evaluation report, commissioned by the Region (Regione Puglia, 2012), examines the positioning of the Apulian LAGs under the Regulatory Framework (QR).<sup>6</sup> According to this analysis, LAGs enjoy a degree of decision-making autonomy in the formulation stage of the LEADER approach mainly in identifying partnerships, setting up and preparing the LDPs and identifying tools, actions and beneficiaries. At the implementation level they mainly focus on the exercise of delegated functions. On the basis of these variables, the "Leaderability index" was developed through a qualitative methodology, which represents the synthesis between the two dimensions of decision-making autonomy and functional autonomy.

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<sup>6</sup> The Puglia Region for the implementation of the LEADER approach produced a series of programming acts (the RDP, the selection criteria of the Measures, etc.) and implementation (the call for selection of DSTs and PSLs, the calls for measures, the funding, guidelines and procedures manuals, etc.) (Regione Puglia, 2012).

Scores were assigned for the two dimensions considered. For decision-making autonomy in the formulation stage, three orders of fundamental analysis factors were considered, representing over 80% of the score available for the matrix, in terms of absolute value, namely: territory, partnership and strategy. For the implementation phase, represented by a lower weight (equal to less than 20%), the following were considered: selection criteria and room for maneuver of the LAGs (degree of flexibility).

The dimension of functional autonomy is related to the attribution of tasks and activities to be carried out and the ability to implement and manage the local development strategy. In the formulation stage, therefore, two variables are considered, representing about 30% of the score available for the matrix in terms of absolute value: critical mass of the territory, administrative, managerial and financial capacity. Over 70% of the score is based on decentralization of tasks and functions, performed in the implementation stage. The two dimensions and the related variables are shown in the following table 3.

Without dwelling too much on the method and interpretation of the various variables, which are certainly affected by the Community guidelines and albeit with these interpretative limits, it is nevertheless interesting that the regional self-assessment is rather critical and confirms our analysis by adding further food for thought especially for the future.

**Table 3. Region Puglia: dimensions to evaluate “Leaderability”.**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Phase</b>
<b><i>Decision-making autonomy</i></b>	Homogeneity of the territory Composition of the partnership Strategic capacity Autonomy of strategic elaboration Potential for integration Potential for innovation Potential for cooperation Potential for networking	Formulation stage
	Autonomy for project selection Degree of flexibility	Implementation stage

<b>Functional autonomy</b>	Critical mass of the territory Administrative, management and financial capacity	Formulation stage
	Definition and completeness of the procedural and financial framework Animation, involvement and support for potential beneficiaries Preparation, publication of the public calls Evaluation of applications (admissibility and priority evaluation) Check of admissibility of payment applications Monitoring	Implementation stage

Source: Our rielaboration based on Regione Puglia, 2012, pp. 60 – 64.

By combining the two dimensions (decision-making and functional autonomy) in their positive and negative scores, four ideal types of “Leaderability” are obtained (Figure 8). This classification is useful as it also allows a self-assessment of practices according to constraints and procedures within a regulatory framework. In fact the different typologies of LEADER are the following:

*LEADER light*: the regulatory frameworks allow LAGs very limited decision-making power and they perform few tasks in the Axis 4 multilevel governance system. In these situations, the role of the LAGs is limited to deciding intervention strategies within a limited range of predefined measures (more often than Axis 3), with reduced space for original interventions relating to the local strategy. The LAG can therefore be compared to a “territorial information and animation desk of the RDP”.

*LEADER LEADER*: on the opposite quadrant are those contexts in which, as indicated by the EU legislator, the LAGs have full capacity and decision-making autonomy in the formulation and implementation of local development strategies. Thanks to the skills acquired, they receive administrative and control functions. This is a higher stage of development, being considered a local development agency.

*Implementing Agencies*: this is an intermediate situation in which the LAGs are considered reliable in terms of administrative procedures and in

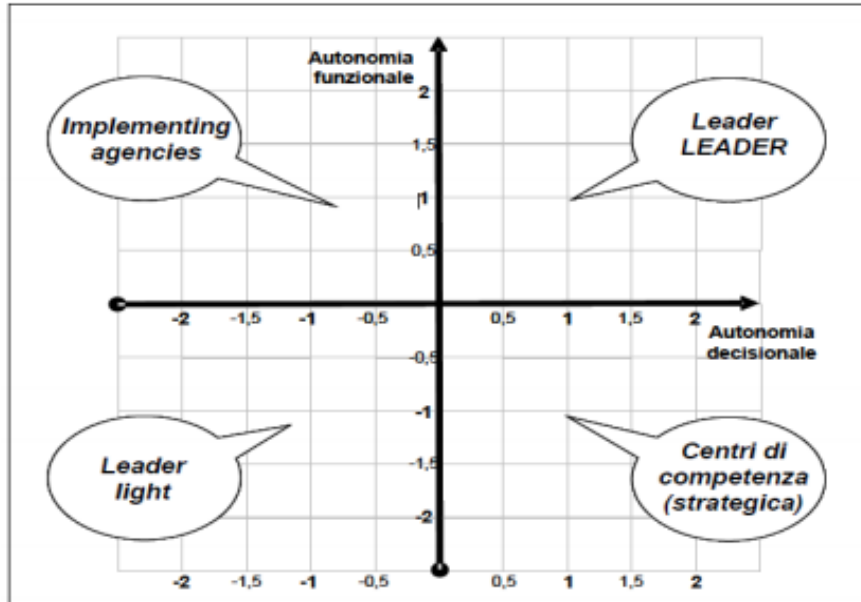
acting as a stimulus for the "demand for policies" that emerges at the local level. They have a limited autonomy for which essentially administrative tasks are entrusted to bureaucrats with little or no strategic responsibilities.

*Strategic Competence Centers:* these are cases in which the Central Authority allows LAGs a certain leeway in formulating and implementing innovative strategies and experimental initiatives. The LAG is therefore entrusted with the functions of formulating development strategies, defining actions and measures and criteria without being able to act on the implementation level, in fact the preliminary and control tasks are the responsibility of the central authority (Regione Puglia, 2012).

As emerges from the matrix, the Rural development plan for Puglia is located in the "Implementing agencies" quadrant showing negative scores for decision-making autonomy and positive ones for functional autonomy. This is important because the distorting effects of the regulatory framework are explicitly recognized and as previously stated, they have significant repercussions on the implementation of the LEADER method and therefore on the action of the LAGs. In terms of decision-making and strategic autonomy with regard to the choice of the reference area and the partnership, the LAGs were able to establish the area covered and the actors to involve with a certain autonomy.

On the local participatory decision-making level, although on the one hand there is a greater sensitivity in seeking shared formulas and methods of intervention, on the other hand, the forms of incentives that emerge are very weak. Furthermore, there is little autonomy to develop innovative local solutions and/or experimental proposals compared to the provisions of the RDP Measures. As regards the margins of maneuver for the Apulian LAGs, there is little possibility of participating in setting the calls and selection criteria for the beneficiaries, since they are indicated by the central authority. Another critical aspect that emerged is the obligation to link Axis 4 of the Puglia RDP with the actions of Axis 3, effectively limiting different and original solutions and the optimization of intersectoral connections that can be established between different actions and corresponding to different territorial needs (Ibidem).

Figure 8. The Ideal types of “Leaderability”.



The figure describes how the regulatory frameworks recognizes varying levels of decision-making and strategic autonomy to the LAGs. Four types emerge: Implementing Agencies is an intermediate situation with a limited autonomy and little or no strategic responsibilities; LEADER LEADER, on the opposite quadrant, full capacity and decision-making autonomy in the formulation and implementation of local development strategies; LEADER light with very limited decision-making power and the strategies are elaborated within a limited range of predefined measures; Strategic Competence Centers: leeway in formulating and implementing innovative strategies and experimental initiatives without being able to act on the implementation level. Source: Regione Puglia, 2012, p. 66.

Regarding functional autonomy, the delegation of tasks to LAGs is relatively broad in relation to both to the administrative and control functions, however the following shortcomings have emerged: the scarce possibility of adapting the calls and selection criteria to regional measures and although no strict limits are set for the territorial critical mass, there are no elements that favour the identification of an adequate territorial dimension sufficient to support the local development strategy (Regione Puglia, 2012). An important aspect that also emerges from European cases and in particular the Finnish case is the importance of the institutional, human and social context. Briefly reviewing the experience of the Finnish

LAGs (see also Table 2), although the functional and strategic autonomy allowed to local actors is important, it is also true that the continuous training, the experience gained and consolidated, the presence of expertise, the openness to involvement and comparison internationally and between actors in a dynamic and multidisciplinary environment, the support for the creation of open and international multi-actor networks, the presence of relationships of trust and a dynamic social, economic and institutional context are the key variables for the success of the implementation of LEADER on a local scale.

Regarding the Apulian case, although there are limits deriving from the regulatory and evaluation system that have determined a reduced strategic and decision-making autonomy of the LAGs, on the other hand the latter should have been a reference point for comparison on the level of practices, thus contributing to a constructive dialogue with the regional government.

In fact, in multilevel governance each actor should interact at different levels contributing cognitive input, experiences and abilities, thus making it possible to implement change in a visionary perspective. Given the community guidelines to which all the actors should contribute for the definition, it is important that they take a form appropriate to the territories. They should not be conceived as rigidly prescriptive, otherwise, although programmes constantly refer to a new approach to planning, the actual aim will evidently be the consolidation of traditional practices, with token adherence to the rhetoric of social innovation, participation and the bottom-up approach.

The analysis carried out on the planning documents for the period 2007-2013 confirms the weak implementation of the LEADER method on a local scale due to the restrictions and constraints on the regulatory and prescriptive level. However it is important to reiterate the role of the intermediary actors who, thanks to their experience, skills and competences, should represent the needs of the territories and activate changes especially in terms of governance.

The adoption of a rather traditional productivist approach has also revealed important critical issues in the implementation of the initiative on a local scale. The entrenched nature of traditional governance models has limited the effective capacity for the desired sectoral and territorial integration thus preventing the actors from triggering real processes of change on a local scale.

In the current 2014-2020 programming cycle as indicated by the European Community (EU, 2013), the rural development policy pays particular attention to innovation and knowledge, indicating among the strategic objectives the promotion of competitiveness in agriculture and forms of sustainable management of natural resources and, for the climate, the achievement of balanced territorial development that takes into account rural communities, including the creation and maintenance of employment.

As we have discussed, in recent years rural development policy has undergone important changes, passing from a productivist approach to a distinctly territorial approach with evident criticalities in the adaptation and implementation on a local scale. The approach aimed at territorial and sectoral coordination should be guaranteed by integration with the Europe 2020 strategy, from which wider objectives are derived and articulated in 6 intervention priorities: transfer of knowledge and innovation, vitality and competitiveness of agricultural companies, organization of food chain and risk management, restoration, conservation and improvement of ecosystems, resource efficient and climate resilient economy, social inclusion and economic development.

Priority 6, for which most European countries have allocated around 11-20% of total planned public spending, aims to have a greater impact on social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas focusing on specific areas of intervention: a) facilitating the diversification, creation and development of small businesses, as well as the creation of jobs (Focus Area 6A); b) promoting local development in rural areas (Focus Area 6B); c) improving the accessibility, use and quality of information and communication technologies (ICT) in rural areas (Focus Area 6C). For this priority, the resources aim to provide basic



services and encourage the renewal of villages, the application of the LEADER approach for local development (Labianca and Navarro, 2019).

For the current programming cycle 2014-2020, Puglia has decided to implement the LEADER within the EAFRD in rural areas with development problems, intermediate rural areas, in some protected areas of high natural value, in intensive and specialized rural areas previously involved in the 2007-2013 LEADER programming (Figure 9). An important element is the possibility of intervening in areas with overall development problems, selected within the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) through additional funding from the ERDF and ESF (European Social Fund) in order to favour the coordination of two strategies: one national and the other regional, certainly complementary and strategic.

Local development strategies may be single-fund (supported only by EAFRD) or multi-fund (also supported by other Community funds ERDF, ESF and/or the EMFF). In each case, at least 5% of each Rural Development programme is allocated to measure 19 - participatory Local Development LEADER. In order to favour a more integrated approach from a strategic point of view, the Puglia region has opted for a multi-fund approach. Measure 19 contributes to Priority 6 "Striving for social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas", in relation to Focus Area 6b "Stimulating local development in rural areas".

At the same time, the measure assumes a transversal character and will also contribute to the pursuit of other Focus Areas according to the different local development strategies proposed by the LAGs (Rete Rurale Nazionale, 2016).

In the current Rural Development Plan of the region the measure indicated is n. 19 addressed to the support for local development LEADER (SLTP - community-based local development) (article 35 of EU regulation no. 1303/2013). As usual, the RDP contains explanatory sections of the interventions, in particular in the statement of the objectives:

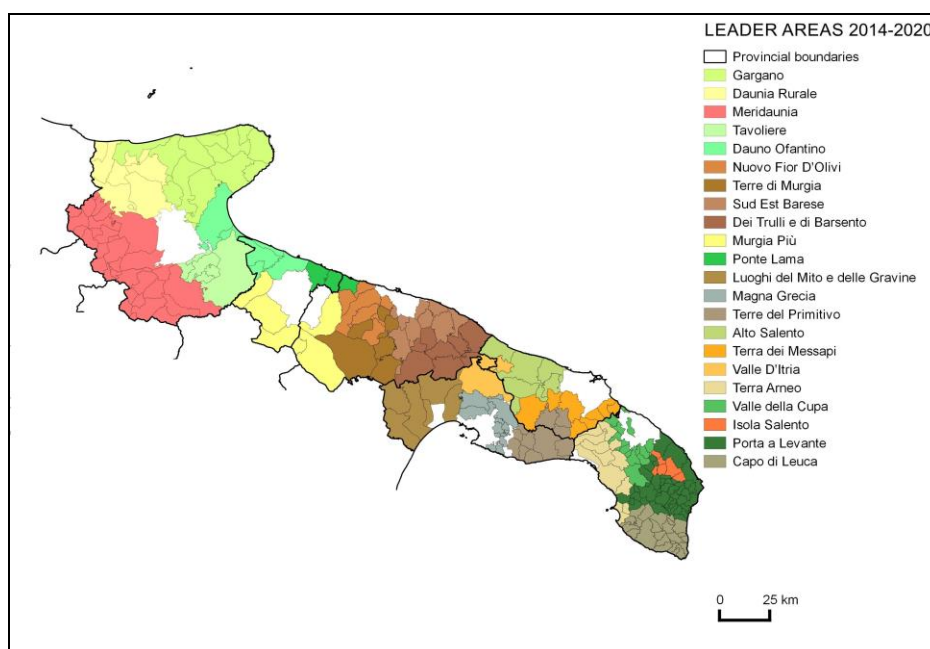
- guarantee the social and economic development of the territories by supporting economic and social activities (integration of immigrants used

in agriculture) and services, linked to production, environment, landscape, culture, tourism and social supply chains of the individual territories;

- increase employment and development opportunities for new businesses, promote the permanence of the population, improve the profitability of companies, assure local populations an adequate quality of life;

- establish and strengthen local partnerships, capable of implementing integrated socio-economic and territorial development plans and projects and encouraging the participation of local actors (Regione Puglia, 2019).

**Figure 9. LEADER areas during 2014-2020 programming cycle.**



*Source: Our elaboration based on Regione Puglia, 2019.*

In particular, in the current cycle, the LAGs are recognized as having an important role in promoting innovation, the integration and coordination of policies in the territories, also in relation to the important interventions envisaged in the National Strategy of Inner Areas. From a programmatic and procedural point of view, the greater selectivity of the territories involved and the local development plans entrusted to the LAGs, focuses

attention on the strengthening of local partnerships and on the greater participation and involvement of the various actors in initiatives and persistent projects on the same territory.

The logic that promotes the implementation of LEADER is expressly described with a clear reference to the underlying type of planning. It is aimed at supporting:

*“A higher quality of local planning, also in terms of defining expected results and clear, responsive and measurable objectives, as well as the consequent measurement and evaluation of the related effects and impacts; economic and social actors in the local area for the promotion of diversification processes of agricultural activities capable of combining the economic sustainability of new investment initiatives with opportunities for socio-working integration and social innovation designed to develop the resources of rural areas and promote a higher quality of life, including through integration with sector policies in social, health and active labor policies; innovative local development strategy, aiming at job creation locally and the enhancement of local resources, encouraging sustainable production activities from an environmental and economic-social point of view, services for the population and social inclusion in particular through the use of the tools referred to in art. 20 of EU Regulation 1305/2013; a concentration and rationalization of the governance tools and roles envisaged at local level; planning inspired by transparency, efficiency and the general sustainability of its action and simplification of governance tools and procedures for access to European funding; planning inspired by the active, mature and conscious participation of the partners, public and private, including from a financial point of view, in order to ensure effective, concrete representativeness”* (Regione Puglia, 2019, pp. 974-975).

In the document the concern to satisfy the respect for the community directives is evident, although there is a lack of more precise indications of intervention. In the context of integrated and multi-sectoral local development strategies, LEADER interventions should contribute to all three of the following crosscutting objectives:

- “for the environment, through the possible activation of measures that incentivize investments for the safeguarding and enhancement of the natural environment and forests, landscape protection, responding to specific local needs;

- for climate change, through the possible activation of measures that incentivize investments in renewable energy and energy saving, as well as for the protection of the natural heritage in general and forestry in particular;

- for innovation, through the animation activity that it is hoped will be carried out by the LAGs to promote the establishment of local partnerships that carry out cooperation projects for the development of new products, practices, processes and technologies as well as for the diversification of agricultural activities into related activities such as health care, social integration, society-supported agriculture and environmental education and food, using the support provided for by measure 16 (Article 35 of Reg. (EU) No. 1305/13)” (Regione Puglia, 2019, p. 976).

The measure is divided into sub-measures: 19.1 Preparatory support; 19.2 Implementation of interventions under the CLLD (Community Led Local Development) strategy; 19.3 LEADER cooperation activities; 19.4 Management and animation costs. Clearer operational recommendations can be found in the description of the sub-measures. In particular, the first about the preparatory support deals with the preparation and formulation of the local development strategy under a participatory approach.

This preliminary, time-limited phase should improve the quality of the partnership setting-up phase and the planning of the local development strategy. The sub-measure provides support for the specificities in order to improve the capacities of local public and non-public actors in carrying out their role in LEADER, such as training, animation and networking.

The animation is expressly indicated as essential to "encourage community members to participate in the local development process through the analysis of the local situation, of the relative needs and of the possible improvement proposals" (Regione Puglia, 2019, p. 977).

An essential point for the implementation of the LEADER method is that "one of the first and most important tasks of local partnerships is to assess the capacity-building needs of the community and integrate them into the strategy". The partnership should therefore provide indications on the capabilities of the community and the activities needed for improvement. These skills concern: information sessions, support to promote the aggregation and organization of the community, project development advice and support, as well as training.

The explicit provision of these activities in the RDP is an important innovation because it clarifies the interventions despite closely following community recommendations. However, given the rather short time frames allocated to these complex activities which differ greatly according to the context, the time limits on their definition and development (in fact these activities require professionalism and adequate times that cannot be reduced to a few months) would inevitably affect the quality of the activities themselves, undermining their effects and credibility in particular with the local community.

Sub-measure 19.2 provides for the implementation of the local integrated territorial development operations described in the strategy drawn up by the LAG and on the basis of the results of the animation activity conducted on its territory. This sub-measure also contributes to satisfying the requirements of the participatory and systemic approach, with a "demonstrative and innovative character", serving to raise quality of life also through the improvement of services to the population and the city-countryside relationship (Ibidem).

The requirements of the strategy include, in addition to the indication of the territory covered by the intervention, an analysis of the development needs and potential of the territory, including an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats; a description of the strategy and its objectives; an illustration of the integrated features, strategy and a hierarchy of objectives, with the setting of measurable targets for the achievements and results.

Another aspect concerns the description of the local community association process. The formulation of strategy clearly requires an

operational action plan, as well as demonstration of the LAG's management, monitoring and evaluation capabilities.

The LAGs indicate objectives aimed at specific thematic areas, (no more than three) consistent with the emerging needs, the opportunities identified, with the skills and experiences gained by the subjects belonging to the LAG, in order to strengthen the quality of the design and implementation of interventions. This last point is important because there is a clear reference to the enhancement not only of material but also intangible resources such as knowledge and professionalism within the LAG. Another important aspect is that the local strategy must contain a strong interconnection and integration between the thematic areas selected.

However, there is little reference to innovation. In fact, the objective must be that of creating local employment and enhancing local resources, encouraging sustainable production activities from an environmental and socio-economic point of view, promoting services for the population and social inclusion. Emblematic is the interpretation of innovation as "an action that generates a change for the economic and social development of a specific territory. The degree of innovation is determined by the specific context of the territory. A practice developed in other contexts can represent an innovation in the LAG territory, where this practice has never been introduced" (Regione Puglia, 2019, p. 985).

In this regard, while on the one hand the role of innovation is recognized not simply as being of a productivist nature but closer to the concept of social innovation, and the specificity of the contexts is supported, on the other hand it is simply reduced to re-proposing innovative experiences conducted in other contexts, again denying the proper character of social innovation and the existing link with local territorial capital.

On the other hand, once again the Region establishes specific themes within which to formulate the local plan. They primarily concern the economy and production systems including local renewable energy chains, tourism, care and protection of the landscape, land use and biodiversity (animal and plant), enhancement and management of

environmental and natural resources, cultural and artistic heritage linked to the territory, access to essential public services, social inclusion of specific disadvantaged and/or marginal groups, promotion of legality in areas of high social exclusion, urban requalification with the creation of inclusive services and spaces for the community, smart grids and communities, economic and social diversification linked to changes in the fisheries sector.

At the same time, however, the value of small-scale projects that are integrated, innovative, experimental and cooperative is recognized. And again it is specified that innovation does not exclusively concern research and development activities, nor new technologies "but is closely connected to what the LAG wants to change" (Regione Puglia, 2019, pp. 985-987).

This highlights the greater attention paid to the role of innovation and above all to the significance it assumes on a local scale. It is an important element that allows the LAG an unusual strategic autonomy. In fact, being an expert on the local context, the LAG can establish the need for innovation, an important opportunity that nevertheless requires intense preparation and awareness on a local scale. Such skills require knowledge of competing policies at different levels that must necessarily be integrated into a strategic vision as we will see in the next paragraphs.

In order to implement these interventions according to a participatory approach, measure 19.4 concerns management and animation costs. This is a strategic but often underestimated measure. In fact, from our point of view, it represents the heart of the functioning of the LAG. From its description, it concerns the operational management of all the phases and procedures required for the implementation of the initiative, with a widespread animation operation throughout the territory to encourage the active participation of local operators. It is a matter of acquiring resources for effective and efficient management of the local development strategy.

For this reason and for what has emerged so far in this study, these measures cannot be reduced to the mere administrative and accounting management of projects. In this case, in fact, a very traditional model of

planning would be proposed, since the actors are responsible for the implementation of the local strategy.

In the context of the application of LEADER, it is a sub-measure that assumes a strategic and not marginal role as has happened in the past. Although from a programmatic point of view there is a greater awareness of change and of the ways to initiate it, in operational terms the lack of clear references could re-create situations and criticalities of the past, reducing the LAG to a mere implementation agency. In fact, this measure should, among other activities, contribute to raising internal skills and professionalism, developing new competences and ways of working, through open debate with the local community.

In short, it is no longer sufficient to change or innovate individual pieces composing strategy, but rather a different, more drastic approach is required, capable of triggering changes of a distinctly cultural nature.