

Eugenio Cejudo-García
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Win or Lose in Rural Development

Case Studies from Europe

 Springer

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Reflections About The Practice of Rural Development in Europe

Reinvigorating Rural Values and Action—The Shift Towards New Perspectives on Rural Development



Thomas Dax  and Ingrid Machold 

Abstract This chapter provides a synthesis of the increasing number of rural studies and policy assessment processes on rural development over the last decades. It focuses particularly on the implementation by EU Member States of the CAP since it first incorporated specific action on rural development. While highlighting the widespread concern amongst analysts and experts regarding balanced and sustainable territorial development, it assesses the limited success of the different policies and highlights the inherent failures of policy outlines, as manifested above all in the persistent “cleavages” between rural and urban areas. The main aim is therefore to explore the changes required in underlying policy narratives in order to reflect rural values and instigate rural action that seeks to identify and exploit the opportunities inherent in remote areas and place-specific natural assets. From this perspective, we also analyze ongoing discussions amongst research and policy actors in favour of a shift towards a long-term vision that departs from “business-as-usual” frameworks. Given the spatial diversity, legacy and institutional contexts, we believe that a fine geographical scale is of great importance and that local development will play an essential role in future transitions.

Keywords Rural research · Rural policy · Spatial diversity · Scale · Narratives

1 Introduction

For several decades now, rurality has been embraced as a comprehensive perspective that goes far beyond farming and other land management activities. For many policy analysts, the European Commission’s strategic document on “the Future of Rural Areas” (European Commission, 1988) was the initial impetus for a new approach

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based on genuinely “rural” policies that had largely been absent from earlier policies and programmes. Ever since that initial debate, policy commitments and programmes have increasingly been designed to address the specificities of the challenges facing rural areas. Initially, rural development action was regarded as little more than a supplement to agricultural policy, although the demand for a much wider approach to rural action gradually gained support, with calls for greater efforts in other policy directions apart from agriculture. In Europe, this process took place, in part at least, within the discussions (Buckwell et al., 1997) surrounding the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which led to the establishment of the Second Pillar of the CAP in support of rural development. Many of these discussions centred on how to create specific policy schemes and achieve an effective, consistent approach between the different policy sections (OECD, 2006a). All over the world, there have been demands for sweeping reforms of rural policy (Shucksmith et al., 2012; van der Ploeg et al., 2012). This has led to specific reform processes in Europe (Copus & de Lima, 2015; Dax & Copus, 2018) and the USA (Pipa & Geismar, 2020) and common research trends at a global scale (Marsden et al., 2020).

However, the expectations of stakeholders and experts who were hoping that their respective policy concerns would be rapidly included in the evolving programmes and implemented in rural regions have only been met to a limited extent. Many scholars have deplored the science-policy gap in relation to rural development priorities (Copus & Dax, 2010; Dwyer et al., 2007; Knickel et al., 2018; Lowe & Brouwer, 2000), while emphasizing the demand within society for more appropriate policies to be applied. The urgent need for change is a recurring topic in reform discussions (e.g. Dax & Copus, 2016) and a source of intense debate with the engagement of diverse actors, NGOs and calls for new policies. As the challenges arising from climate change contributed to changes in strategies and forms of action, the issue of transformation began to gain traction in many parts of society, so leading to an increased commitment to “transformation” science (Tschakert et al., 2016). For rural areas, it is particularly important to bring about transformations that address the many aspects influencing real outcomes on the ground, which are visible at local, regional and national scales.

Despite long-term implementation and funding of rural development policies and overarching shifts in policy frameworks over various decades, rural performance has hardly improved. While for many years policy implementation has tried to respond to the challenges arising from diverse, unfavourable contexts, its limited spatial effects were considered primarily to be due to the complexity of “disadvantaged” rural spaces. More recently, however, they have been attributed to the “failure” of the policies applied. It is particularly striking that some rural regions are prospering, while others with similar conditions are in decline and seem trapped in a shrinking downward spiral. As part of the analysis of these divergent policy outcomes, it seems important that local social capital attributes should be combined with external drivers (Li et al., 2019).

However, rural development policies are still closely linked to the instruments deployed within the Second Pillar of the CAP and there is little coordination with regional, social and environmental policies that have substantial impacts on rural

regions. With this in mind, this article also focuses on related international studies, as a means of analyzing how the European research field interpreted the new emerging challenges and incorporated them into their theoretical framework. It refers to a comprehensive review of the research activities carried out within the ERA-Net RURAGRI, a European research network (2009–2013) aimed at fostering cooperation between researchers and intensifying rural development analysis to help understand upcoming challenges (Meredith et al., 2012). The analysis reveals the long-term development of research interest in this field, starting from the discussion regarding the evolution of rural policy and research, which led to a revaluation of rural assets and an emphasis on the particular features of rural areas as sources of opportunity. The presentation of European research activities in this field covers a series of major European studies commissioned by the European Commission Framework Programmes over the past two decades. This overview will be synthesized in a discussion on the interrelation of spatial developments and the need to overcome negative narratives that view “rural” as synonymous with disadvantaged, less innovative and dependent places with few noteworthy opportunities. The conclusion sets out the need for major transformation as a result of this challenging situation and points to demands for policy action that goes beyond “business as usual”.

2 Theoretical Framework: A Long-Term View of the Evolution of Rural Policy

When rural issues began to gain importance on the political and research agendas, analysts, decision-makers and actors soon realized that “rural” could not be understood simply as “non-urban” and that there were many different degrees of remoteness, enormous diversity and internal differences within rural areas that required a much wider, more in-depth assessment of local features and variations. Furthermore, innovative discussions in the 1990s (OECD, 1999) pointed to the need to reframe the narrative. Instead of focusing on rural regions as disadvantaged and “backward”, it was also important to identify and emphasize their intrinsic potential. Local action became increasingly linked to activities aimed at enhancing place-specific assets that had socioeconomic potential and built on the cultural legacy of regions and their historical backgrounds (OECD, 1999). This new approach centred on exploring the untapped potential of local features or assets and different ways of valorizing them, focusing above all on place-sensitive development strategies.

However, such ambitious conceptual outlines were hampered by stereotypes that equated rural development with agricultural development, thus neglecting the contributions made by other sectors, additional socioeconomic drivers and place-specific action. At the same time, ongoing social, economic and environmental change meant that key new trends were at least mentioned in the design of new, reformed EU policy on rural affairs. The main items on the agenda of these discussions included (Dax,

2015, p. 35): economic diversification, rural innovation, the complexity of (multi-level) governance processes, a comprehensive view on “integrated” policies and a core role for the territorial dimension.

If we look back at the evolution of discourse and policy, we can see that path dependency and policy inertia acted as strong obstacles to the swift implementation of transition strategies and a more effective uptake of new, better-adapted rural development action. Indeed, the specificity of the challenges facing rural regions was recognized as a threat to balanced territorial development and raised widespread concern as to the best way to mitigate spatial imbalances. Following a long debate on how to increase the effective implementation of fair and inclusive territorial policies, the OECD announced that a “New Rural Paradigm” was emerging (OECD, 2006a). This assessment was supported by intensive discussions on the convergence of the main policy areas involved, i.e. agricultural and regional development policy (OECD, 2006b). At that time, the OECD claimed that:

promoting integrated rural development poses numerous policy and governance challenges. It requires a less ‘defensive’ approach to rural policy and stronger coordination across sectors, across levels of government, and between public and private actors. It also requires a new focus on places rather than sectors and an emphasis on investments rather than subsidies (OECD, 2006a, p. 3).

The complex array of challenges facing rural development is a major issue in the discussion of a relevant, up-to-date research agenda. The ERA-Net RURAGRI (under the project title “Facing sustainability: new relationships between rural areas and agriculture in Europe”) distinguished between the “core” and “underlying” challenges behind the high dependence of rural places on external, overarching factors beyond the control of local and regional authorities. As that research focused above all on the objectives in terms of the sustainable development of agriculture and rural areas, for the purposes of the present review of rural research, we extended it to include local development priorities, so encompassing the comprehensive requirements of socio-ecological systems and spatial interrelations between different areas and scales of action (Fig. 1).

While research and policy discussion are clearly aware of the limited effectiveness of the transition towards this new approach to rural development (Bryden et al., 2011; OECD, 2006b, 2022), the territorial dimension has been tackled from quite contrasting perspectives. The predominant narrative treats rural regions as remote, weakly developed areas, with limited development potential. Brouwer and Lowe (2000) detected a bias in research coverage fuelled by the strength of northern European concerns and the limited assessment of the environmental impacts. They also noticed a bias towards fragmented policy measures and monodisciplinary studies. Although since then the discourse has increasingly focused on exploring the wide array of challenges and opportunities, and on concepts such as sustainable development, ecological concern, diversification, multi-functionality, quality focus, rural restructuring, endogeneity, networks and globalization, there is a lingering impression that these terms remain “buzz words” with limited analytical power to guide rural actors (Copus & Dax, 2010).

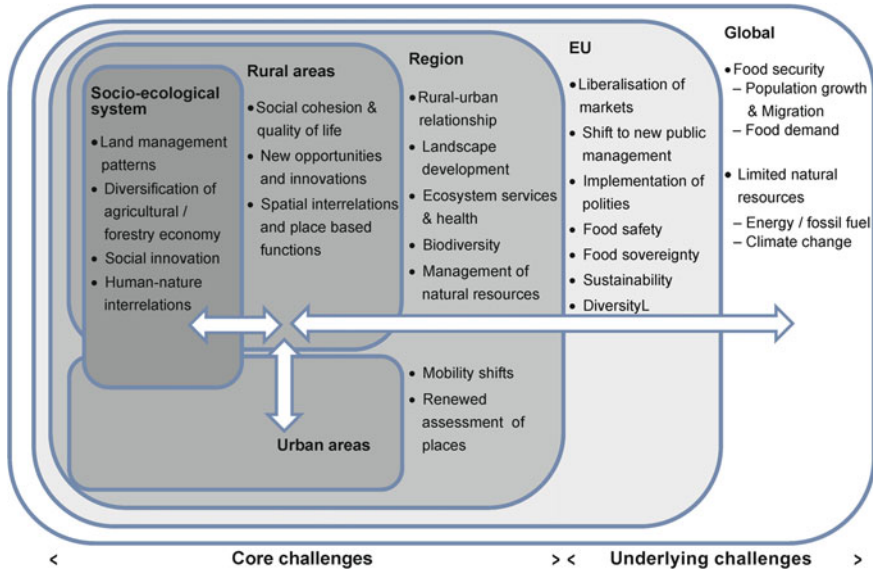


Fig. 1 Interrelations and challenges for the sustainable development of rural areas. *Source* Designed by the authors, adapted from (Dax, 2014, p. 63)

Setting out these difficulties of rural regions as a basis for policy design is built on the preconceived idea that many rural areas are in a situation of dependence in an ongoing “downward spiral” from which it is very difficult to escape. Many activists and researchers are therefore promoting alternative perspectives for rural policy in peripheral areas. The concept of peripheries with “handicaps” is considered to be closely related to ideological representations which view these areas as being plagued by unfavourable structural issues. The underlying traditional analysis is based on the assumption that liberal market economies have negative effects on less accessible “handicapped” regions (De Souza, 2018). The identification of these structural phenomena as inevitable sources of weakness for remote places should be considered heavily value-laden. As a result, the intensive search for alternative approaches is inspired by the conviction that mainstream narratives have to change so that remote rural areas can be viewed in a more realistic light, which also encompasses positive outlooks, and defensive postures can be set aside. The global rural research agenda must therefore address the intensity of interaction between the different actors more effectively, building a new framework within which to reposition the rural–urban dichotomy and enhance participatory approaches (Marsden et al., 2020). The same authors argued that “assessing and accompanying the converging hopes for rural futures” should be a priority issue for significant rural studies (Marsden et al., 2020, p. 206).

Long-term analysis would seem to be a factor in recent policy declarations aiming at securing effective rural action and putting meaningful monitoring systems in place. The two major examples in this respect are based on the OECD’s and the EU’s

remit to seize on ongoing spatial trends and design appropriate policy frameworks. Ever since the OECD announced its “New Rural Paradigm” in 2006, it has been reviewing its effects by evaluating the implementation of rural policies in a number of Member Countries. As the resulting observations provided limited evidence of changes in the underlying institutional structures and development patterns of the rural regions concerned, it pushed for a closer link between policy concepts and outcomes in the regions. Eventually, this resulted in the drawing up of the “OECD Principles on Rural Policy” (2019), which establish a comprehensive set of criteria for understanding, designing, engaging, implementing and assessing effective rural policies at appropriate scales.

Similarly, the European Commission initiated a process to draft “A Long-term Vision for the EU’s Rural Areas” (European Commission, 2021), aimed at providing useful guidance for a Rural Action Plan that fostered development “towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040”. The wide participation in preparing this vision reflects the Commission’s awareness of the need to involve local and regional actors, include various perspectives from diverse stakeholders and encourage different institutions and people from different backgrounds to express their views.

Against this backdrop, local stakeholders and scholars have presented their own visions for changes in the way we assess places and attach value to them. This includes the requirement to take fine geographical distinctions and variations over small distances into account. In an assessment of this kind, location matters and place-sensitive approaches will address specific contextual aspects much better than existing policy frameworks which have done so far (De Toni et al., 2021). Policy challenges arise particularly from the fact that spatial development is inherently uneven (Peck, 2017). This means that localized studies and policy programmes are essential if development action is to help bring about real spatial justice (Madanipour et al., 2022).

3 Enhancing the Value of Rural Assets and Viewing Them as Opportunities

The conceptual changes described above are based on a wide array of studies, networks and research-policy consultations, which embrace a broad diversity of viewpoints, cultural backgrounds, experiences, interests and scales of action. A far-reaching review of this literature is required. An overview of this kind should not focus on any one particular institution or country, and any attempt to present a survey on long-term research priorities would have to address its core limitations. These centre above all on the blurred boundaries of the definitions as to what “relevant rural research” should include, the terminology, the priority focus on English publications at the expense of the work and the findings published in other languages, the varying size and visibility of the research projects, the (non)inclusion of different

institutional levels commissioning relevant research and the inherent difficulty in covering all the contents and details of the different programmes and reports.

The review in this chapter is based on the studies conducted by the RURAGRI ERA-Net, a European Research network which created a sound body of research at both national and European levels.¹ Its commitment to establishing a rural research agenda (Johansson et al., 2012) resulted in a common assessment of research priorities for European countries which covered the three cross-cutting issues of diversity, rural–urban relationship and governance. The aim was to enhance rural potential and achieve balanced sustainable (territorial) development. The findings produced by this European research network (Dax, 2014) formed the basis for a workshop held to discuss the direction of EC research towards the “Empowerment of Rural Areas”, which laid the thematic and methodological foundations for the research agenda for Horizon 2020 (EC—DG Agri, 2015).

In this chapter, we extend the overview of research conducted in 2015 to the present time by including additional reports and literature, and by selecting relevant recent research studies commissioned within the more recent EC Framework Programmes. The main criteria for selecting studies were their comprehensive spatial perspective (European scope), the focus on the challenges and opportunities for rural regions, the awareness of the issues arising from spatial attribution to urban or rural and the discussion of the boundaries and interlinkages between the two, as well as a reference to dominant or shifting spatial narratives and aspects of multi-level governance. These aspects are seen as important ingredients for assessing the values attributed to rural areas and essential for detecting local and regional opportunities. The discussion of appropriate scale is therefore a recurring concern in many of these analyses. Research seems to centre around increasing change narratives, focusing in particular on evidence and evaluation, and governance and institutional development as core prerequisites to achieving real transformation and lasting transition pathways.

Table 1 contains a selection of about 50 research projects from a much wider group of relevant studies. The selection was deliberately restricted to the Framework Programme studies with the greatest visibility and scholarly reputation. In some cases, projects on similar themes were left out to make space for the ensuing discussion of the topics, the shifts in priorities and the values on which rural action should be based, as expressed within the research discourse. To help readers gain a better idea of the contents of each project, the full titles are listed below in the notes section. It should also be emphasized that the exchange and uptake of research considered “external” to the Framework Programme (such as tenders commissioned by EC Directorates or the European Parliamentary Research Service, the ESPON programme, OECD and UN/FAO research on rural issues and policy design and assessment, amongst others) are also regarded as important and Commission Services are intensively exploring sensitive issues of spatial development.

¹ Previous research collaboration and programme work on “rural research” issues included in that review cannot be repeated here for reasons of space. Among others, these include national research programmes or sub-programmes, SCAR reports and Foresight studies, comparative assessment

Table 1 Selected EC rural studies about transformation needs

Main focus of studies	FP6 (2002–2006) and earlier	FP7 (2007–2013)	Horizon2020 (2014–2020)	Horizon Europe (2021–2027)
Theory building	DORA, ETUDE, ASPIRE, RAPIDO	FARMPATH, DERREG	GLOBAL-RURAL, IMAJINE, RELOCAL	*)
Natural resource base	MEACAP, SEAMLESS, SENSOR	VOLANTE, HERCULES, CLAIM	RURITAGE, MOVING	BioRURAL, RethinkAction, COEVOLVERS,
Socioeconomic dimension	CARERA, TERA, RESTRIM, RUREMPLO, TERESA	GLAMUR, RURALJOBS	LIVERUR, SIMRA, MATILDE	FLIARA
Knowledge and innovation	TOP-MARD, MEA-SCOPE	SOLINSA, VALERIE	RURALIZATION, DESIRA	COMNECT, GRANULAR
Narrative of change	PLUREL, EUROLAN	TRANSIT	PEGASUS	RUSTIK
Governance	PRIDE, IMPACT, CORASON	RuDI	ROBUST, PoliRURAL, SHERPA	RURACTIVE

*) Aspects of spatial mobility changes are addressed in the Horizon Europe TRANSFORMATION Call (2022), while changes due to COVID-19 and rural future issues are the main foci in the COMMUNITIES calls (2023 and 2024)

Note The full titles of the research projects are set out in the Annex

Source based on EC workshop 2015 (Dax 2015) and updates from CORDIS analysis

New assessment patterns point directly to the core need for transformation. This requires a particular sensitivity for transformation knowledge, which must be considered a priority. The European research strategies have taken this approach on board and many calls for research proposals require the co-creative outline, design and implementation of projects which aim to enhance and secure the uptake of recommendations and change proposals and their conversion into practical action. A thorough review of the different themes explored in influential projects and the approaches they take reveals that studies of transformation in rural development research are built on a comprehensive analysis of different analytical issues. As shown in Table 1, these can be differentiated into: working to establish a sound theoretical foundation and raising awareness to ensure better understanding of rural concepts; the central role of the analysis of natural resources, their management and sustainable use; the exploration and place-specific study of the huge array of socioeconomic aspects of rural development, seeking meaningful assessment of the economic and social

studies (such as REAPER in the 1990s) and COST Actions (Rural Innovation) to instigate rural research, and literature reviews covering the main thematic journals and thematic analyses.

challenges, opportunities and changes; the focus on knowledge development and the need to construct frameworks for all kinds of innovation (social, procedural and technological), as foundations for local and regional action and change; the key role of presentation—of how rural development and rural policy options are presented—and the need to overcome the stereotype visions set out in mainstream narratives and the important contribution to be made by the different public administrations, business sectors and citizens in the achievement of effective multi-level governance schemes. All these aspects form part of the agenda guiding policy reform and research in a more deliberate approach to identify the required changes and reflect the “close intertwinement of narrative and practice” (Wittmayer et al., 2019, p. 10).

4 Departing from the Impasse: On Boundaries, Local Focus and Interrelation in a Globalized Environment

Current discussions are characterized by contradictory presentations of the different elements of the dominant concepts and the interpretation of rural options. While it is commonly accepted that rural development must be part of increasingly complex place-based activities and spatial policy approaches, programmes and dedicated discourse tend to concentrate on “smart” or “innovative” solutions. The desire for useful and effective concepts requires clear-cut boundaries and approved definitions, linked programmes with a well-organized structure and set of instruments and tools, a clear attribution of cause–effect relations and sound, primarily quantitative monitoring and impact assessment methods. However, many of the European studies (and further research analysis as well) struggle with many of these requirements, obtaining their findings in different ways, so making their assessment difficult. In particular, the failure to achieve the intended positive changes for rural areas is often attributed to methodological issues, weaknesses in programme implementation and a lack of appropriate measurement.

There are many social, cultural, institutional and structural obstacles that can stand in the way of the social innovation and the adaptations that may be required in the local economy for rural development to be achieved. These obstacles can be viewed as an expression of power relations, market dependence due to (neo)liberal concepts, diverging perspectives and rising uncertainty. In the search for sustainable development, it is crucial to abandon unidimensional, linear explanations as conceived in the notions of modernity, progress and “growth”. Arguing within “simplistic notions of innovation (and progress), focusing on those ‘lagging behind’, who must ‘catch up’ or ‘leapfrog’ to where others have reached” (Scoones et al., 2020, p. 1) is often an unrealistic, overly simplistic objective, which may ultimately prove frustrating. Embracing uncertainty as a core feature in the development process is therefore inevitable, if a realistic, fruitful result is to be obtained.

The dominant approach is not only reductionist, but also results in remote rural regions being branded as dependent and locked into a negative, downward spiral. The overall context undoubtedly contributes to this negative impression, so creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. In this situation, it seems important to emphasize the many alternative approaches suggested in the aforementioned projects, in further studies and in particular in local action in search of new lifestyle patterns and modes of making best use of rural and remote spaces. Against the prevailing paternalistic attitude towards development and the priority given to central planning structures, the focus needs to return to local development and a new vision for rural places within the pressures exerted by globalization. Efforts to address these issues have focused on areas that have suffered long-term neglect, such as “shrinking rural regions” (Dax & Copus, 2022), while the local scale has been promoted through the “smart villages” approach (Visvizi et al., 2019), “smart experimentation” in less-favoured regions (Kristensen et al., 2019) and “spatial justice” requirements in local development (Shucksmith et al., 2021).

Future rural research must therefore focus on structural issues and the lack of implementation of change processes at various levels. With this in mind, the following four fundamental findings attempt to synthesize the discourse and emerging research needs:

- Rural regions cannot be conceived as strictly separate from urban areas. Interrelations between adjacent and distant locations imply both dependences and opportunities and require a more reciprocal exchange and the recognition of the contributions made to society by all areas. This warrants *non-biased* functional attributions between rural and urban areas.
- “Leaving no one behind” is an essential principle of sustainable development goals. Enabling inclusion and participatory pathways must therefore be a top priority for rural development. However, this needs to be taken seriously and must have real consequences in terms of shifting the *decision-making* process to more decentralized levels.
- Rural areas are typically characterized by a wealth of natural resources, with which many of the main tasks that must be carried out in these areas are directly related, including securing sustainable food production, high-quality ecological development, natural and cultural heritage and preventing environmental destruction, the loss of biodiversity and the loss of resources. To guarantee effective development, information gathering, monitoring and evaluation processes need to be targeted at *fair, sustainable and territorially balanced* development pathways.
- Policies need to embrace, and focus much more, on their role as enablers of the creative use of local resources and local capacities. Enhancing the awareness of local actors and developing their capacities must be seen as foundational aspects of rural development. Such approaches need to address the diversity of spaces, their potential and creativity for change and must not content themselves with the same standard roll-out of new technologies. They must also bring about a

lasting commitment which is built on socially based action to shape *local development* processes. These long-lasting frameworks require resilient pathways when it comes to maintaining the focus of action on sustainable development.

5 Shaping New Policy Narratives

As findings from previous extensive reviews of the state of the art of research into rural issues suggest, scholars explore a wide range of varied topics, which are increasingly interlinked with policy discourses. The aforementioned ERA-Net RURAGRI (Johansson et al., 2012), the EC's research programme discussion on priorities for rural analysis (EC 2015) and the current efforts towards strengthened governance for EU rural areas (EC—European Commission, 2022) all highlight a wide set of topics and a change of priorities. A lot of important work is also being done outside Europe, with for example reviews of the long-term practice of rural studies in the USA (Ellis & Biggs, 2001; Irwin et al., 2010) and analysis of rural development issues at a global scale (Evans et al., 2014). The discourse has been advanced by the claims that a new paradigm is required as a more appropriate alternative to the mainstream development policies aimed exclusively at “growth”. Some of the alternatives proposed are based on degrowth concepts (D'Alisa et al., 2015) and non-western ideas of well-being, such as the “buen vivir” alternatives being put forward in Latin America (Artaraz et al., 2021).

As so many complex issues are involved in this process, it was argued that inter- and trans-disciplinary research methods are needed to ensure effective responses to policy demand, which is often characterized by important policy trade-offs. As mentioned earlier, mainstream narratives are largely defensive and do not view rural areas as “lands of opportunity”, innovation or creative power. However, the evolving discourse is shifting in precisely this direction by placing stronger emphasis on rural transformation pathways, so shifting the concern away from the challenges to focus instead on nurturing resilient areas.

For many people, their local environment is their main area of reference, even if relationships stretching further afield have been growing in recent years. For any transformation to be successful, it is therefore crucial to start from local values and design activities relating to local assets (natural and cultural heritage, human capital, skills, specific capacities, creativity, etc.) experienced by local people. Local development cannot be dismissed as being based on “traditional” attitudes or nostalgic perspectives, thereby undermining its credibility as a meaningful approach to modern-day rural issues. Its inherent aspirations and relationships with the community and nature must therefore be taken seriously. In this way, the design of specific policies for small places is becoming particularly important for improving territorial cohesion (Medeiros, 2022) and can provide a sound base for local economies. Therefore, in view of the strong horizontal and vertical networks, cooperation activities and socioeconomic interrelations at various scales, there is great scope for customized actions to tackle the specific problems of each local area (Willett, 2021).

However, many local areas are considered as traditional communities who are not prepared to take up these challenges. Much of the research therefore focuses on how to build local and community capacity to respond to these challenges. In some cases, despite the promotion of local assets and the identification and enhancement of rural specificities, local response is limited, so emphasizing the urgent need for empowering and emancipatory approaches should gain priority in rural programmes' implementation (Scoones et al., 2018). Even though integrative action with a focus on social capital development has been side-lined in many programmes in which the priority was short-term economic success, this should not be viewed as a "luxury" reserved for prosperous regions and, on the contrary, should be regarded as a key issue that helps forge feelings of belonging in local communities and regions (Tomaney, 2015).

Building social capital is therefore a crucial issue that must not be overlooked. It has come to the fore in recent discussions as a core feature of change processes (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2023) and resulting action in various aspects of transformation (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020). Social innovation has been identified and applied as a prerequisite for rural development and many studies attest the pivotal role of initiatives that strengthen social innovation and social capital. Actions of this kind are often presented as "good practice" and the setting up of effective local networks and activities is largely dependent on the enthusiasm and eagerness of local actors to get involved (Slee et al., 2022). Here again, there are increasingly frequent calls for a change in the underlying narrative in order to bring about real transformations in rural development processes. Wittmayer et al., (2019) analyzed how social innovation initiatives could contribute to the transformation of society and identified three complementary spheres of analysis, namely the content, construction and role of the narrative. These distinctions are crucial as the main focus is usually on the contents that require adjustment. However, the obstacles to achieving a shift towards new narratives lie above all in the difficulties of constructing and assigning a specific (alternative) role to the narrative.

Societal processes of this kind do not take place in a void. It is essential to understand the institutional framework with the different positions of the stakeholders, the presentations and misrepresentations of alternative approaches and the obstacles that arise to prevent the realization of transformation goals. Adopting and achieving these objectives therefore involve a very profound process of change for societies (and their representations at different scales).

Recent investigation into transformation processes shows that a successful transition is not merely a question of changing the contents and must cover many other dimensions. As (Wittmayer et al., 2019) reveal, it is a matter of how we conceive this change process and what role we assign to new (altered) perspectives. Moreover, the need to question and deconstruct our "growth" paradigm is shaking the foundations of the capitalist system and its associated social structure. In particular, the deep transformations demanded by current crises require different forms of adjustment, i.e. "material transactions with nature, social interactions between persons, social structure, and people's inner being" (Buch-Hansen & Nesterova, 2023, p. 1). In this

way, the self-sufficiency and well-being of people in relation to the places where they live are assuming fundamental roles in emerging narratives.

Against this background, local stakeholders and scholars are setting out new ways of assessing and attaching value to places. This includes addressing the fine distinctions and variations that can arise between places just a short distance apart. In an assessment of this kind, it is clear that location matters and place-sensitive approaches need to address contextual aspects much more than policy frameworks which have done so far (De Toni et al., 2021). This perspective enables the identification of the inherent, unquantifiable value of many features of rural areas. It recognizes that local people cannot exchange rural areas for cities without losing specific traits and amenities which are specific to place and together form a unique set of local features. The local economy should build on its natural and cultural heritage to provide place-sensitive responses to current societal challenges. Seemingly old-fashioned values of remote areas, including distance, open space and low density areas; tight interlinkages with natural features and experience, “wildlife” and fresh air, the changing seasons, peace and quiet, time to think, “atmosphere”; alternatives to large scale, speed and growth-related pressure, must be preserved in its social relevance and secured as valuable ingredients for local development. Rural research needs to understand these inherent values and should not try to quantify these “priceless” intangible benefits to society (Ackerman & Heinzerling, 2004).

6 Conclusion: The Great Challenge: Leaving “Business as Usual” Behind

The trends in recent research on rural development point to an increasing awareness of research–policy interaction and the need for trans-disciplinary research. This view is based on the long-term evolution of related studies and research priorities (Dax, 2015), the assessment of the practical impact or lack of uptake of the ensuing recommendations (Forum Synergies, 2022) and the scenario considerations underpinning the main outlines for future policy and local action. As comparative scenario analysis reveals, action tends to focus on short-term adaptations which can be applied more easily, while long-term problems remain untreated. The major trends highlighted in recent scenario discussions (Kuhmonen, 2021) point to the legacy effects of structural conditions, demographic challenges and their enduring consequences, the impending, urgent need for climate change transition and the implications of the scarcity of natural resources and shifts towards a stronger focus on the bio-economy. At present, stakeholders regard these trends as quite dangerous for rural areas such that the “negative” outcomes for these areas are expected to be more severe than the positive ones. However, as can be seen in many recent studies, a wide set of promising alternatives are being proposed by local activists. According to the specific spatial type, these include activities such as the creation of “alternative food systems in city

areas, community-based action in rural areas close to cities, rural lifestyle in rural villages and remote work in remote rural areas” (Kuhmonen, 2021, p. 59).

In this summary, it seems crucial to stress that rural research needs to conceive overall spatial dynamics as an important driver for rural areas that must not be neglected. With recent crises and the heightened recognition that these trends are inherently shaped by spatial adaptations, it is no longer just a question of rural discourse and instead relates to spatial investigation as a whole. Martin et al. (2022) thus recognize the need for a rethinking “of economic theory, of the meaning of economic ‘growth’, of ‘wealth’, of ‘value’, of governance and belonging, of the role of the state, and of democracy itself” (Martin et al., 2022, p. 16). The most urgent task within this general transition is “how best to reconfigure spatial policy in order to help and bring ‘left behind places’ and their communities back into the economic and social mainstream” (Ibid 2022, p. 16). As discussed earlier, the rural research agenda has to respond to these “grand challenges”, which go far beyond sectoral or local adaptations. We must be aware of the tight interrelations between rural and urban regions (Bosworth & Venhorst, 2018) and the long-term legacy of socioeconomic and ecological development, issues which are highly complex concerns in the shaping of future pathways. While many expectations are placed on technological progress and increased accessibility due to digital connections, in terms of overall structural adjustment and organizational improvements, it should be clear that a creative approach to development must also incorporate the social dimension and how people can make best use of these technological changes. How we “design” our social environment, what we regard as priority “values” and our visions of the future of our society will be decisive for important lifestyle changes and well-being in our rural regions.

Annex

Selected EC Framework Programme projects, by programme period (in alphabetical order).

FP6 (or earlier)

- AsPIRE (FP5, 2001–2004) Aspatial Peripherality, Innovation and the Rural Economy;
- CARERA (2006–2008) The Impact of CAP Reform on the Employment Levels in Rural Areas;
- CORASON (2004–2007) A Cognitive Approach to Rural Sustainable Development, the dynamics of expert and lay knowledges;
- DORA (FP5, 1999–2001) Dynamics of Rural Areas;
- ETUDE (2007–2009) Enlarging the theoretical understanding of rural development;
- EUROLAN (2003–2005) Strengthening the multifunctional use of European land: coping with marginalisation;
- IMPACT (1999–2002) The socio-economic impact of rural development policies: realities and potentials;
- MEACAP (2004–2007) Impact of Environmental Agreements of the CAP;

MEA-SCOPE (2004–2007) Micro-economic instruments for impact assessment of multifunctional agriculture to implement the Model of European Agriculture; PLUREL (2007–2011) Peri-urban Land Use Relationships—Strategies and Sustainability Assessment Tools for urban–rural linkages; PRIDE (1999–2001) Partnerships for rural integrated development in Europe, RAPIDO (2007–2009) Rural areas, people and innovative development; RESTRIM (2001–2004) Restructuring in marginal rural areas (the role of social capital in rural development); RUREMPLO (1997–1998) Agriculture and Employment in the Rural Regions of the EU; SEAMLESS (2005–2009) System for Environmental and Agricultural Modelling; Linking European Science and Society; SENSOR (2004–2009) Sustainability Impact Assessment: Tools for Environmental, Social and Economic Effects of Multifunctional Land Use in European Regions; TERA (2005–2008) Territorial Aspects of Enterprise Development in Remote Rural Areas; TERESA (2007–2009) Types of Interaction between Economy, Rural Society, Environment and Agricultural activities in European regions; TOP-MARD (2005–2008) Towards a Policy Model of Multifunctional Agriculture and Rural Development.

FP7

CLAIM (2012–2014) Supporting the role of the Common agricultural policy in Landscape valorization: Improving the knowledge base of the contribution of landscape Management to the rural economy; DERREG (2009–2011) Developing Europe’s Rural Regions in the Era of Globalization: An Interpretative Model for Better Anticipating and Responding to Challenges for Regional Development in an Evolving International Context; FARMPATH (2011–2014) Farming Transitions: Pathways Towards Regional Sustainability of Agriculture in Europe; GLAMUR (2013–2016) Global and Local food chain Assessment: a Multidimensional performance-based approach; HERCULES (2013–2016) Sustainable futures for Europe’s Heritage in Cultural landscapes: Tools for understanding, managing, and protecting landscape functions and values; RuDI (2008–2010) Assessing the Impact of Rural Development Policies; RURALJOBS (2008–2010) New sources of employment to promote the wealth-generating capacity of rural communities; SOLINSA (2011–2014) Agricultural Knowledge Systems in Transition: Towards a more effective and efficient support of Learning and Innovation Networks for Sustainable Agriculture; TRANSIT (2014–2017) Transformative Social Innovation Theory; VALERIE (2014–2017) Valorising European Research for Innovation in agriculture and forestry; VOLANTE (2010–2015) Visions of Land use Transitions in Europe.

Horizon 2020

DESIRA (2019–2023) Digitisation: Economic and Social Impacts in Rural Areas;
 GLOBAL-RURAL (2014–2019) The Global Countryside: Rural Change and Development in Globalization;
 IMAJINE (2017–2022) Integrative Mechanisms for Addressing Spatial Justice and Territorial Inequalities in Europe;
 LIVERUR (2018–2021) Living Lab research concept in Rural Areas;
 MATILDE (2020–2023) Migration Impact Assessment to Enhance Integration and Local Development in European Rural and Mountain Areas;
 MOVING (2020–2024); Mountain Valorization through Interconnectedness and Green Growth;
 PEGASUS (2015–2018) Public Ecosystem Goods and Services from land management—Unlocking the Synergies;
 PoliRURAL (2019–2022) Future Oriented Collaborative Policy Development for Rural Areas and People;
 RELOCAL Resituating the local in cohesion and territorial development;
 ROBUST (2017–2021) Rural–Urban Outlooks: Unlocking Synergies;
 RURALIZATION (2019–2023) The opening of rural areas to renew rural generations, jobs and farms;
 RURITAGE (2018–2022) Rural regeneration through systemic heritage-led strategies;
 SHERPA (2019–2023) Sustainable Hub to Engage into Rural Policies with Actors;
 SIMRA (2016–2020) Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural Areas.

Horizon Europe

BioRURAL (2022–2025) Accelerating circular bio-based solutions integration in European rural areas;
 RethinkAction (2021–2025) Cross-sectoral planning decision-making platform to foster climate action;
 COEVOLVERS (2022–2026) Coevolutionary approach to unlock the transformative potential of nature-based solutions for more inclusive and resilient communities;
 COMNECT (2022–2025) Bridging the digital divide and addressing the need of Rural Communities with Cost-effective and Environmental-Friendly Connectivity Solutions;
 FLIARA (2023–2025) Female-Led Innovation in Agriculture and Rural Areas;
 GRANULAR (2022–2026) Giving Rural Actors Novel data and re-Useable tools to Lead public Action in Rural areas;
 RURACTIVE (2023–2027) Empowering rural communities to act for change;
 RUSTIK (2022–2026) Rural Sustainability Transitions through Integration of Knowledge for improved policy processes.

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Schools of Pastoralism. Between Institutions, Groups of Interest, Local/Regional Stakeholders and National/European Frameworks for Rural Development



Letizia Bindi 

Abstract The paper addresses the creation and development of a National School of Pastoralism in Italy (several and multifocal cases) and its impact in the very definition, enhancement and special profiling of a new and more sustainable way to continuing and regenerating extensive pastoralism today in the country. The analysis is realized comparing, between lights and shadows, the different educational projects to other international experiences such as the French and Spanish schools of pastoralism. Local actors and professionals are often scarcely included in the process of enhancement and relaunching of such a sector or addressed in a very top-down way. The a. is presently involved in several Schools of pastoralism and she thinks that a first critical evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses can be advanced.

1. The first case will address the process of construction of a national school of pastoralism by a group of institutions, universities and professional/experts associations, the SNAP (*National School for Pastoralism*) firstly released on September 2022 in Piedmont and Lombardy, promoted by CREA (Center of Research on Agrarian Economy), CARIPO Foundation (Bank) and the National Rural Network of the Ministry of Agriculture.
2. The second case will address a School for Shepherds in Sardinia promoted by a local LAG in the framework of an overall proposal of sector regeneration with Regional Funds deriving from European programs for Rural Development (*School of Pastoralism of the GAL Anglona-Soros*).
3. The third case will approach the ongoing path toward a School of Pastoralism promoted by an international project based in Tuscany academic/research clusters and European funds (*SHEPforBIO*).
4. Finally, the fourth case is focused on a small and already experimented course on extensive pastoralism proposed by the Mobile History Yards in the region Marche: a multidisciplinary training offer for shepherds, herders, cooperants, policymakers and experts (*Shepherds are Guardians of the Future*).

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1 Pastoralism at Stake

Extensive grazing of different animal species and breeds traditionally implies quality productions and biocultural heritage safeguard. They contribute to the maintenance of biodiversity, landscape and ecosystem services, while reducing land consumption and hydrogeological risks. In inner, mountainous and isolated areas as for example islands, the shepherd are guardians of fragile territories, attacked by growing phenomena of socio-cultural deconstruction and abandonment. In addition, pastoralism offers a sustainable and autonomous form of work and income, helping to keep mountain areas, often marked by severe depopulation and impoverishment, alive and productive.

Transhumance, in turn, is a particular form of breeding and a system of knowledge practice, based essentially on the seasonal movement of shepherds together with their animals in search of pasture, from the mountains to the plains, from the inner regions to the coast and back. This particular way of breeding defines a mode of land use and a landscapes' definition in many parts of the world (European and non-European) and involves many different animal species (sheep, cows, horses, reindeer, camelids, etc.). It is a practice that provides not only food and other products derived from animals, but also a series of ecosystem services and common goods: a profound maintenance of local spaces, a regeneration of the biodiversity of the territories and of the animal bred lines, the persistence of specific forms of social organization and management of environmental resources that today are usually pointed out as an alternative to the unsustainability of industrial agricultural systems.

In many European regions, researchers have documented the presence of transhumant populations since pre-Roman times: these populations are responsible for having profoundly shaped the European agricultural landscape and for having generated a network of trans-regional and cross-border mobility that is also the basis of the first exchanges between European communities and cultures (Aime et al., 2001; Costello & Svensson, 2018). At the same time, this practice has given rise to a powerful grammar of spaces, with its logics, rules, tenses and interactions in which "traces (are) similar to words or punctuation" (Bindi, 2020; Ingold & Vergunst, 2008, p. 9; Palladino, 2017).

More recently, sheep, cattle and other types of animal farming have been transformed or influenced by processes of modernization, mechanization and intensive milk/meat/wool production (Århem, 1985; Aronson, 1980; Asad, 1970; Ingold, 1990; Nori & Scoones, 2019; Salzman & Galaty, 1990; Schlee, 1989; Scoones, 1995; Viazzo, 1989). This has generated uncertainty, discontinuity and change in practices, a different form of knowledge transfer and a great socio-economic transformation. However, in many European countries, extensive grazing still exists as an efficient form of agriculture that shapes the landscape, preserves biodiversity, protects

vernacular architecture and traditional social structures. Moreover, inter-specific coexistence is a crucial element of traditional forms of animal farming implying the reconsideration of the relationship between culture and nature as well.

Although the products of extensive grazing are increasingly appreciated for their quality, respect for the environment, the landscape and animal welfare, for environmental and economic sustainability, the sector is currently exposed to a serious animal loss, registering an evident reduction of farms and a little generational change. For this reason, it is increasingly necessary to support the sector, helping herders in technological innovation processes, in the organization and optimization of production, in social innovation and the generation of new economies, as well as in the adequate management of ecosystems safeguarding cultural identity.

Contemporary extensive grazing spaces appear, in a way, as a “friction area” (Tsing, 2005, 2013, 2015). On the one hand, in fact, modern intensive agro-industry and the trend toward “extractivist” agri-food production have led to the growing abandonment and/or improper use of pastures; on the other, they have radically transformed production conditions and human–animal interactions, typical of extensive grazing, the moral economies of agriculture according to tradition and in harmony with the surroundings and landscapes.

Therefore, it is increasingly appropriate to make the younger generations and people living far from rural areas aware of the usefulness and value of extensive and traditional grazing: create a new professional awareness, open new opportunities in the agri-food sector, but also to improve grazing as a way to preserve and protect local landscapes.

At the same time, a new look at pastoralism implies a reflection on the growing multifunctionality of farms, but also on the protection and shared management of civic and community land uses, on the recovery of buildings, objects and rest areas for shepherds and flocks (*stazzi*) along the pastoral routes (*tratturi*).

2 A Field of Multidisciplinary Research and Action

Considering the complexity of extensive pastoralism, a multidisciplinary and multi-scalar research is needed. The aim is re-articulating relationships between local, national and international issues, between past and present, considering pastoralism an “area of uncomfortable commitment” (Tsing, 2005) for ecological activism, cultural heritage and tourism promotion in the contemporary scenario.

Italy is one of the three European countries (along with Austria and Greece, but a process is underway to extend this UNESCO nomination to six other European countries: France, Spain, Albania, Romania, Croatia, Luxembourg) in which Transhumance has been recognized as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. This inclusion in the UNESCO ICH List is presently implying a significant impact on grazing, somehow transforming it into a commodity, a tourist consumer good, a commercial brand, a folkloristic practice even, often distorted by market rules and quality certifications, European specifications and the CAP (Bendix et al., 2012;

Bindi, 2022; Grasseni, 2011). In Europe, the debate on forms of synergy between natural and cultural heritage focuses above all on the conservation of habitats and the landscape (Magnaghi, 2010). Research in this area has highlighted pastoralism as a biocultural practice, at the meeting of traditional knowledge and values, landscapes and biodiversity, a customary code connected to a form of resilience. In European and Mediterranean regions historically characterized by extensive grazing, this practice has profoundly influenced social structures and ways of life, kinship relationships, symbolic representations and settlements (Delavigne & Roy, 2004). Today, a certain territorial promotion done in a hurry, from above and without much attention to the elements of biocultural roots settled in the territories, risks to annihilate this set of knowledge and practices.

Related researches involve a radically multidisciplinary approach: the contribution of social sciences, landscape design and planning, rural economics and environmental studies to the regeneration and sustainable development of inner and mountainous regions (De Rossi, 2018), recognizing such spaces as “systemic margins” (Sassen, 2014) where people can experience a sense of belonging to places and forms of fundamental economy (Barbera et al., 2016; Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2016).

The attention that for a long time has been reserved for sheep trails, transhumance routes and traditional grazing practices has not prevented; however, the abandonment and progressive deconstruction and obsolescence of the old mobility infrastructures that for centuries have represented the backbone of our interior spaces in its living and close relationship with the plain and the coast (Bindi, 2019; Petrocelli, 2000). The tratturi have recently become, like many other significant portions of the rural environment, a commercial asset. Special attention is paid to legal uses of these environmental assets, vigilance regarding illegal or para-legal uses of grazing quotas or about the shared management of civic and community uses (Mencini, 2021).

3 Different Actors of the Pastoral Heritage

In Europe, we count more or less around 15 shepherds’ schools.

In Spain:

- Escuela de Pastors y Pastores de Catalunya.
- Escuela de Ganadería y Pastoreo en las Islas Canarias.
- Escuela de Pastores de Andalucía.
- Escuela de Pastores de Extremadura.
- Eskola “Gomiztegi” in the País Vasco.

In France:

- Center of Shepherd Training/CFPPA—Ariège Comminges.
- Maison Regionale de l’élévage PACA di Montpellier.

In Portugal:

- Escola de Pastores de Alvao “Terra Maronesa” in Portugal.

In Italy:

- la Scuola “Giovani Pastori” del CREA/Università di Torino in cooperation with the LAGs announced and started in the Autumn 2022.
- School of Pastoralism in Sardinia proposed and managed directly by the LAG “Anglona-Coros” which is ongoing.
- Shepherd School proposed by the LIFE Project SHEPforBIO in the Tuscan Area of Casentino in progress.
- The Online Course “The Shepherd is a Guardian of the Future” proposed and managed between March and June 2022 by the Agrarian High School and the Macerata Historical Institute as an online course of introduction to the profession of shepherd.
- Shepherd School proposed by the ARSIAL (Regional Agency for the Development and the Innovation of Agriculture in the Lazio Region).

Unlike what has already happened in France and Spain, local and national herders and shepherds’ associations in Italy advanced slowly, and only in recent years, they were established recognizing grasslands and extensive pastoralism as the center of their activities of safeguarding and improvement. Such schools also promoted, supported, informed the various operators of the sector. Among these associations (Asso. Na. Pa., Alpine Pastoralism Association, Ruralpini, etc.), the APPIA Pastoralists’ Network deliberately brings together practitioners, ranchers, transhumant herders, scholars, activists aiming at supporting and raising awareness about pastoral issues, to support themselves with regard to various practical, regulatory and environmental issues such as pastures management, controversial coexistences with large predators, grazing regulations, production and processing of milk and meat, the delicate issue of wool and related crafts, the growing tourist interest in the practices of herders, eco-museums focused on areas and practices of grazing and farming. In this sense, the network is conceived as an associative subject that intends to fulfill the role of mediator of needs, urgencies and requests in the face of contemporary complexity made up of the Common Agricultural Policies (CAPs), the protocols, the national production regulations and the particularly strict European regulations, sustainable rural development projects.

Meanwhile, in France and Spain reserved areas and transhumance houses are constituted as a source of documentation on grazing, but also on the conservation and improvement of cultivated biodiversity (reproduction and protection of sheep, goat and bovine lines in decline) and custody of pastures and transhumance roads. In Italy there is an eco-museum experience specifically dedicated to this in Ponteb Bernardo, in the Cuneo province, which focuses on extensive grazing between the Stura Valley and the Crau plain in the Maison de la Transhumance area of competence. Likewise, in the central-southern area of the Apennines, paths and territorial interpretation centers are being developed, such as the Eco-museum of the Itinerari Frentani Association, which for a few years has recomposed the layout of the paths and their stories through

a system of paths shared and in depth animated by a group of cultists of memory and local stories (Belligiano et al., 2021).

Analogously, in France and Spain, sheep breeding schools are active since a decade, more or less, to prepare new generations of shepherds and breeders enabling them to develop their activity in harmony with the environment and the animals. We assist, effectively, today to a certain tendency to recover grazing among young people and the schools of pastoralism are then designed to provide practical and prospective information, regulatory frameworks, innovation tools, awareness of the heritage value and the tourism potential of agricultural activities. Also in Italy, for about a year, the training offer of the National School of Pastoralism (SNAP) has been elaborating, which is inspired by the aforementioned European experiences, providing practical information and in-depth reflections, cultural requests and perspectives of developing. The SNAP training offer, managed jointly by the APPIA Network, CREA, Riabitare l'Italia, Agenform, the University of Turin and the Vismara and Cariplo Foundations, will be divided into different modules and will respond to different objectives and actors in the area. At the same time, in recent months, a similar experiment is being launched in Sardinia in the School of Pastoralism in the framework of a regional project, which however aims at a national realization, financed by a LAG.

In addition, some experiences of revitalization of the extensive grazing sector have been disseminated in particularly fragile areas, such as the Apennine areas marked by the earthquakes of 2009 and more recently of 2016 and 2017. Some communities in Lazio, Abruzzo, Marche and Umbria thought that pastoralism and what was connected to it could represent a driving force for territorial regeneration. Several groups are engaged in safeguard and valorisation of livestock, traditional cheese making, revitalization of native sheep wool production and dyeing. Other are developing cultural and tourist pathways (Italian Alpine Club, Local associations, Path of the Mutated Lands, Tratturo Coast to Coast as well as the podcasts dedicated—Heh!—promoted by the research group 'Mountain in motion').

At an even broader level of improvement and awareness, FAO has decided in recent years to open a Hub entirely dedicated to listening and interacting with associations and subjects involved in the protection, defense and support of shepherds in different areas of the planet (FAO Pastoralist Knowledge Hub, <https://www.fao.org/pastoralist-knowledge-hub/what-we-do/who-we-are/en/>), as well as the international board of cooperation and support to the United Nations 2026 Year for Rangelands and Pastoralism (IYRP 2026, <https://iyrp-info>).

4 Sheep Farming Schools in Italy: Between 'Patina' and Participation

Considering the 2019 nomination of transhumance to the UNESCO Intangible Heritage List with a process led by Italy, one could expect that the system of sheep-farming schools at the regional and national level was at least as developed as in

other European Countries such as France and Spain, where Schools of Pastoralism are consolidated since several years. On the contrary, in Italy, the first sheep farming course was officially opened in September 2022 in Piedmont, and in the next few months, similar courses are about to start in Sardinia and Tuscany, as said before. It is interesting to analyze the genesis and the institutional and associative frameworks that developed this educational and training proposals in order to understand what model and what role of extensive pastoralism in the processes of sustainable development and regeneration of fragile, mountainous and sometimes marginal rural areas they carry on. The a. is personally participating and/or coordinanting some of the outlined and discussed experiences and courses. This allows a critical evaluation from within of their effectiveness and reliability for the future of this production sector. The a. is part of some of the scientific boards or participated in the program definition of the schools. In the case of the online “Shepherd are guardians of the future” course, she was the coordinator together with one of the high-school professors promoting it and with the local referent of the local historical institute that enhanced this project.

The observation of all the processes accompanying the preparation, elaboration of the educational offer, discussion of the topics, hours, plans, training and study visits previewed by each course permitted to her to reflect both on the inner aims and ideologies animating each experiment and the personal and disciplinary posture she has in the framework of each school and course, but also the role she plays as an anthropologist, as an expert and as an academic in a multiscale and complex setting such as the animal breeding sector development and, more widely, in the overall rural policies setting. The research was conducted through regular participation to the organizational meeting, through interviews with the promoters and referees of each project, through observation and comparison among the different training and educational plans and proposals and the analysis of the different economic, socio-cultural and geographical contexts.

Among local differences, four experiments and roadmaps are presently ongoing:

- The “Giovani Pastori—School of Pastoralism 2022. Training and co-planning of innovative ideas”, which is promoted by a rich group of public entities and associations in the main framework of the National Strategy of Internal Areas (SNAI), University of Turin and the CARIPLO Foundation together with the ‘Rehabiting Italy’ Association, the Center of research on Agrarian Economy (CREA) and National Rural Network of the Italian Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, and only partially linked to local administrations and LAGs.
- The regional School of Pastoralism promoted by the LAG Anglona Romangia in the Region Sardinia with funds from the Region Rural Development Program and supported by several Universities (University of Turin, Molise, Sassari) and by the training agency ‘Agenform’ with the aim of preparing shepherds to the new challenges of the market and of sustainable animal production, to the respect for the environment and the vocations of the territory, to the ecological and multifunctional development of farms.
- The ongoing project of a Tuscan School promoted by an academic research cluster and supported by European funds based in the Casentino area by DREAM and

EuroMontana Shep-for-bio with EU Life funds, especially committed to supervising and monitoring the limits and distortions of the policies aimed at agriculture and livestock.

- The case of a small course started in the “G. Garibaldi” Agricultural Institute of Recanati (in the region Marche)—entitled *The shepherd is a guardian of the future*—oriented to students, teachers and external participants and realized in cooperation with academic competences, outlining a proposal of formal and informal education on pastoral issues.

All these experiences have been recently presented and discussed in an online meeting organized by the Life Project *Shep for Bio* on the July 2022, the 22th, where all the protagonists and scientific referees were involved to compare and harmonize the different training proposals. Many of them, by the way, are involved in all the projects, being parts of Universities or Associations, which are deeply involved in this fieldwork and engaged since many years in research-action projects on pastoralism in Italy.

4.1 SNAP—National School of Pastoralism ‘Young Shepherds’

The SNAP project is mainly based on the role of young people and the innovation of traditional crafts as an opportunity for the sustainable development of inland areas, implemented by the promoters on the base of results of the “Young Inside” monitoring project (GSSI—Grans Sasso Science Institute research). This survey was conducted among young people living in inner and mountainous Italian areas and explored conditions and expectations of young generations in this context, from the point of view of action research. The qualitative–quantitative and highly empirical research has allowed to investigate the value motivations that push young people between 18 and 39 years to “stay” or “return” to the territories of the Italian internal areas, observing socio-economic dimensions as well economic aspects of such a choice, also investigating the potential for sustainable development linked to the agro-forestry-pastoral sector. Results show first of all a relatively consistent shift in the representation of inner areas in last years, as a place increasingly welcoming and offering a simple, alternative and suitable lifestyle, in contact with nature and its community. More than half of the young people who participated in the survey and represented this change are highly educated have a degree and more than 70% are already working. They decided to invest in their future by staying in their own territory, in many cases working in agriculture or pastoral activities. The survey suggests that this kind of changing target needs to be supported by national government strategies and local institutions. Among these alternative proposals, pilot initiatives as the schools of pastoralism can be certainly relevant. Pastoralism, in fact, considering the limited initial investment, seems a good opportunity in mountain contexts,

coupling a suitable lifestyle with an active participation in agricultural communities and the recovery of traditional practices, environmental and social sustainability mixed with innovation and new technologies. Problems that young shepherds and cheese-producers are facing are essentially fragmentation of the offer and the scarce habit to cooperate in the territories as well as the high heterogeneity and diversity of products and of finding the right markets to address.

At the same time, the figure of the shepherd and cheesemaker, often united in the same person and identified in many contexts with the owner of the company, can increasingly be appreciated in new experiences of the territories and can also have a pivotal role as a biocultural heritage keeper (Ballacchino & Bindi, 2017; Bindi, 2020).

In some case, young people are coming back to the mountainous and rural areas trying to focus on small, sustainable and niche productions, despite a certain lack of information and technical support to develop sustainable rural activities and increasingly difficult access to credit and funds.

In this scenario, based on the revival of traditional activities such as pastoralism, the research-action and training project “Building a future together” was born, aimed at facilitating the start-up of innovative initiatives focused on agriculture and livestock breeding, new rurality and multifunctional perspectives. The first idea is to help young new comers accompanying actions identifying and developing initiatives to accompany the companies and the launch of innovative businesses in the agricultural sector, through expertise and research action.

The second major objective was the experimentation of a National School for Pastoralism—SNAP, a free six-week training course carried out in two experimentation sites in the north and central-south of the country, with the aim of both forming a group (between 20 and 25 students in total) of new shepherds, providing the tools for the economic and socio-cultural enhancement of the practice of extensive pastoralism in order to combine income objectives, good management of ecosystems and social innovation in fragile areas. The training course will focus on the pillars of the pastoral economy, i.e., the supply of quality products and socio-environmental services, with particular reference to cheese-making techniques and the grafting of innovative skills in the dairyman’s profession, to the management of pastures, animal nutrition and welfare.

Implementation of participatory scouting activities in the different territories, improving and innovating the technical skills of the participants in the context of traditional practices and offering a concrete opportunity for collaboration between them and for comparison with the researchers and trainers are the main objectives of the SNAP network. The idea is also to offer the young people involved in the experimentation access to mentorship and networking paths available in the territories involved in the research (such as the “I go to live in the Mountains helpdesk” offered by the Metropolitan City of Turin) and to the support opportunities made available by the partners of the project (Coop-fond, Vismara, Cariplo). SNAP explores the potential for concrete capacity-building actions for young inhabitants of inland areas who decide to invest in agriculture with an innovative perspective coupled with a slow and experiential type of tourism and multifunctional companies. The training

course addresses the priority issues for pastoral supply chains and related productions (such as pasture management, grazing practices, sustainable practices, animal feed, cheese making techniques and product quality, supply chains and markets) with a focus on sustainability environmental and also focusing on interaction with local farming communities. The school aims to develop a strong practical and participatory dimension between frontal lessons in the classroom (40 h per macro area) and practical workshops in the grasslands (a second training itinerant week on case studies and confrontation with local actors, experiences, workshops, company visits, peer to peer training activities and moments of interaction with producers, researchers and other relevant actors). A space for comparison with other European experiences (France, Spain) and relevant actors and local stakeholders from different territories is previewed.

4.2 The School of Pastoralism in Sardinia: An Anglona Romangia LAG's Initiative

The pastoral school proposed by the LAG Anglona Romangia in Sardinia has a strong regional character. It focuses on a very careful analysis of the territorial and socio-economic and cultural context of the Sardinian rural reality which has always been strongly characterized by pastoral activity. After a phase between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of historical coexistence between agriculture and pastoralism, which also guaranteed replacement and care of the pastures, a different model was developed in the Fifties and Seventies of the twentieth century. The traditional agro-pastoral model experienced a deep crisis between the end of the Fifties and the Seventies as well as a radical transformation of the traditional economic system took place. Between the Seventies and the early Nineties, the growth and market success of Pecorino Romano and the good remuneration of milk implied a strengthening of the dairy industry and an increase in the sheep livestock stock which was accompanied by the consolidation of the extensive farming model. Thus, as much the local inland cereal plantation grows as less the demand for sheep's milk for the industrial production of pecorino romano was growing. Breeders, to satisfy the market, are led to increase the consistency of the zootechnical heritage, and this expansion of the pastoralism is realized, however, all a detriment of agriculture. Pastoralism becomes the most widespread way of using forage resources spontaneous and abandoned land, without making land changes. Furthermore, since 1960, with the abandonment of agriculture, shepherds find themselves using them alone the entire heritage of common lands, whether they are municipal or burdened by civic uses. In this phase of agricultural and related soil transformation practices the traditional exchange between agriculture and pastoralism progressively decreases, dismantling the whole knowledge about conservation of environmental resources, the maintenance of grazing spaces, the production of forage plants and other foods integrating the natural pasture. Since the 1970s, Sardinian sheep farming has undergone

further changes leading to a sedentarization process of transhumant shepherds, with the stabilization of a model of intensive pastoralism. Animal and derived resources production as well as destination markets changed: the main production becomes the *pecorino romano*, exported to Europe and the USA, a mono-market based on tending cost competition weakening the weakest players in the supply chain (small processors and breeders). With the advent of the dairy industry, shepherds stop processing milk and become givers of milk to industrial sectors causing, in those years, a serious loss of artisan expertise connected to milk processing activities. The last phase is defined by a slow descending parable for *Roman pecorino*. The crisis has therefore posed the breeding companies faced with the need to rethink their organizational model, in order to become less dependent on the global market and industrial transformation, through the reintegration of agriculture for fodder as well as other forms of agricultural multifunctionality and tourism which implies different sources of income.

Today, in fact, many of the old traditional companies are repositioning themselves on the market through various multifunctional strategies, according the van der Ploeg's "triangle of multifunctionality": deepening, expansion and repositioning.

The Anglona Romangia LAG is one of the 17 Local Action Groups active in Sardinia that pursue the purpose of implementing a strategy of development and economic, social and cultural growth for the territory. They are financed by the Rural Development Program 2007/2013 of the Sardinia Region through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and their mission is that of "Enhance local productions and enhance the services of the territory, improving quality of the life of the population in rural areas and favouring diversification interventions of the rural economy".

The territory pertaining to the Anglona Romangia LAG includes the 17 municipalities. Moreover, in the area community interest areas (*Natura 2000*) are present as well as historical geo-mineral parks and national protected areas, such as the Asinara National Park and the La Maddalena Archipelago National Park. The territory is characterized by low-density rural areas demographic and with a predominantly agricultural economy, with the presence of minor activities (crafts, tourism, typical products, forestry, rural accommodation, etc.). A significant demographic decrease emerges from the 1960s to today, a phenomenon on line with other areas of Sardinia, but here particularly intense.

The area of interest of the LAG and the School of Pastoralism is characterized by the high presence of agro-pastoral enterprises and their small-scale dimension. According to ISTAT data, in 2016, with its more than 13,000 farms and more than 48% of Italian sheep, sheep farming is one of the main economic activities of Sardinia. The incidence of grazing areas on the total agricultural surface is 52.2%, evidently far from the national average (19.9%).

The Sardinian school started from this specific background and has partly taken up the model of SNAP having, among other things, based the design on the contribution of a group of universities, associations, training companies also involved in the SNAP. The funds are obviously taken from the European Fund and passed through the Program of Rural Development, though the mediation of regional planning and the

disarticulation of the LAGs at local level. A training and intervention model emerges on the renewal and transformation/adaptation of extensive pastoralism to the needs and specificities of the territory and at the same time to the new challenges at a global scale.

The core idea of the Sardinian Pastoral School is to recover and renew the regional pastoral sector as the pivotal element for the local area regeneration, in line with similar political-economic processes in the rest of central-southern Italian rural and remote areas that are presently trying to deal with the competitiveness of the markets, large-scale distribution, growing energy issues and mobility criticalities. In this sense, the school aims to work on a new sense of belonging to the sector, on a new pastoral pride and a rediscovery according to new, more sustainable and innovative methods, aimed—as in the case of SNAP—mostly to young returning shepherds or absolute beginners, increasingly seen as subjects of a new, possible rebirth of inland, mountain areas, to be cared and supported.

4.3 *The Route to Pastoral Renaissance in the Tuscan Casentino: Shep for Bio School*

The third case that this paper aims at discussing, though very briefly given the absolutely starting phase of this third project of a Pastoral School in Italy, is represented by the Tuscan School of Pastoralism in Casentino, proposed and prepared by DREAM and EuroMontana *Shep-for-bio* and essentially based, in this inaugural phase, on European Life funds.

Even in this case, the starting proposal has been essentially formulated by an academic cluster, linked to the *Shep for Bio* project and based on European Life consortium coupled with a European consortium of experts and practitioners as EuroMontana and projecting its action in the framework of the UN International Year for Rangelands and Pastoralism recently designated for 2026.

The Tuscan project is deeply linked also with another European Research Country (ERC) Project on pastoralism called *PASTRES—Pastoralism, Uncertainty, Resilience*. The project aims to learn from the ways that pastoralists respond to uncertainty, applying such ‘lessons from the margins’ to global challenges.

The promoting group of this third proposal for a Shepherds’ School started about a year ago with the preparation of an international meeting on transhumance and extensive pastoralism in their multilevel and integrated functions: sustainable food and other materials production, eco-systemic services, social and cultural heritage safeguard and valorization, animal and environment respect and conservation, social innovation and multifunctionality in agriculture and farming. Different actors and stakeholders have been involved in such a project and an effort has been done to compare among different models of Pastoral Schools in Europe—inviting representative from French and Spanish schools and even other examples—in order to prepare a plan of the future Tuscan School of Pastoralism enabling a real inversion in the

extensive pastoralism in Central Italy, local regeneration, food quality and responsibility enhancement, sustainable development and local tourism. Coordinators and promoters of this project are researchers and practitioners engaged since many years in the extensive pastoral renaissance and in the biocultural heritage valorization of the sector.

4.4 The Shepherd is a Guardian of the Future: A Course Promoted by the Agrarian Institute of Recanati (Region of Marche)

The last case is a small online course—six online lessons/debates—on different topics concerning animal farming. The public entity proposing and promoting such a course were in this case an Agrarian high-school with an important and long-standing history, for years engaged in stages and school agricultural experimentation aiming at soliciting interest in its students and teachers on the transformative and regenerative value of pastoralism for a fragile territory such as that of the Region Marche, deeply marked in recent years by the trauma of the earthquake.

The course has been planned by a cluster of the high-school teachers, university researchers with the participation of protected areas operators and managers, artisans and heritage-keepers and other participants. The last online meeting of the first edition of this course has been focused on local stories and experiences, witnesses and protagonists of the pastoral multifaceted world of knowledge and practices. From the small community of learning and self-training that had gathered around the course in the two and a half months of its development, it seemed that some keywords and possible lines of work have emerged that could be useful to give back and to restart with the new year of lessons and online meeting, eventually thinking about to some on site activities at the very end of this new edition. Among the topics and debates outlined in the training offer of this small course, there is a new attention to the artisanal milk/meat and wool productions, attentive to the well-being of people and animals, giving again the right value to the work of shepherds and cheese-makers or artisans, recognizing the role at the same time productive and protective carried out by the breeders, throughout an opportune critique of the new Common Agricultural Policy and the new Rural Development Programs. The idea to give a first-hand orientation to policies, funds and new trends about agri-food chains and sustainable development policies gives back to school its guiding role toward more sustainable forms of nutrition, allowing young people to equip themselves for their empowerment, to regain ownership of the regeneration processes.

The fifth case of the Shepherd School proposed by the ARSIAL is still in a very starting phase and more info are not yet available.

5 A Few Final Considerations and an Attempt to Assess the Situation

The interest of all these rather heterogeneous examples and experiments of pastoral schools is the attention toward different targets: local stakeholders and practitioners such as young and less young shepherds and herders, cheese-makers, weavers, curious, artists and experimenters of new ways of rural life as well as teachers, researchers and policymakers. What is surely emerging from all these case studies is the radical conviction that pastoralism can truly represent one of the activities enabling a deep regeneration of small, skilled and supportive communities engaged in the most fragile and depopulated territories.

Some elements of characterization are by the way interesting to be outlined:

- SNAP is determined to represent the very first attempt of an organic proposal for pastoral training across the different Italian areas, showing at the moment a probably alpine-centered model and a strong ministerial leadership as well as in some specific university and depending on private funds (Cariplo Foundation) probably interested on future investments in inner Italian area in the PNRR framework:
- The Sardinian GAL proposal is essentially integrated in the regional-insular culture and will probably provide the right model of training considered the specific territorial and historical context. The LAG-based leadership and funds make this proposal surely more attentive to the local dimension and to the specific needs of the pastoral target addressed.
- The Tuscan proposal of the *Shep for Bio Project* is thought both as a specific territorial proposal as well as a model for a general renaissance of the extensive pastoral sector even in the most depopulated, marginal and fragile areas. The project shows a very well-set background research, a powerful network—national and international—of cooperation, but it probably suffers from an excessively academic-centered model of training which is a bit far from the needs of the shepherds.
- The School of Recanati represents a quite interesting experiment. It was again a deeply embedded one, rooted in a territory signed by historical depopulation and the relatively recent 2016 earthquake. Based on a high-school course model, supported and followed by teachers, curious, shepherds, people from the cooperation sector, territorial planners, researchers, it was probably a bit much generic and holistic vis-à-vis the other outlined examples, but it seems also to suggest a relatively easy-to-follow model, maybe a little less specialized, but indeed very appealing for local diffused and interested population.
- The Shepherd School of ARSIAL shows the interesting case of a Regional Agency for the Development and Innovation of Agriculture explicitly involved in the planning and management of the training proposal as an expression of the Regional Institutional governance.

More generally, what emerges from this overall outlook on Italian pastoral schools is that rural policies both at local than at national/transnational scale have missed the

goal of a concrete and efficient support on orienting and informing about a crucial rural sector as the pastoral one, even in areas as the Alpine and Apennines mountains where such a kind of activities should be considered increasingly fundamental to restart sustainable forms of re-inhabiting and regeneration. Observing since several years some of these territories and processes, we noticed and appointed all the difficulties that these Schools are experiencing in the creation of a new imagery and narration of pastoralism, shifting from a residual and remote practice toward a more efficient, innovative as well as proactive rural activity. The backward imagery of a pastoral sector is often associated with a hegemonic and urban/neo-liberal consideration of it as an old form of animal production destined to be definitely substituted by industrial animal breeding. More recently, critical concerns about breeding activities are more generally advanced by animal rights and vegetarian/vegan movements and by the very new debate about cultivated meat and other food resources.

Schools that are currently developing will probably help in safeguarding extensive pastoralism in the next few years. In this sense they are not only interesting as a current phenomenon of revitalization of the sector, but also as the public arenas where a potential reconsideration and resignification of extensive pastoral activities should be accomplished thanks to the support of collective/individual subjects and public/private actors. It is why we consider that pastoral schools deserve to be carefully observed and monitored in the future. An attentive evaluation of their weaknesses and strengths is needed. Shepherds and herders are asking for empowerment and support to this sector which is apparently exalted and fully heritagized in the present, but scarcely supported concretely.

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Rural Depopulation, Civil Society and Its Participation in the Political Arena in Spain: Rise and Fall of ‘Emptied Spain’ as a New Political Actor?



Javier Esparcia 

Abstract Over the last decades, Europe has been affected by major demographic changes. There are many remote rural areas where the general processes of rural shrinking are being accompanied by demographic decline. The severity of these processes has meant that the issue of depopulation has emerged on the agenda of European Commission and some European governments. In the case of the central and regional governments in Spain, the consideration of rural depopulation as a central issue on the public agenda occurred primarily due to the second wave of depopulation (which took place as a direct consequence of the Great Recession of 2008–2013). Virtually all public administrations have designed or implemented public policies, programs and actions aimed at combating the effects of this intense depopulation. The population in rural areas has not remained passive in the face of rural shrinking in general and depopulation in particular. Their dissatisfaction with the delayed intervention of public administrations, as well as with the limited effects of public policies, has led to the emergence and organization of many civic platforms. In 2021, they have given rise to a new political party, ‘Emptied Spain’. In this article, it is analyzed its emergence, the receptiveness of the Spanish population the—negative—reaction of all other political parties (including the furious reaction from the right-wing media) and the latest developments competing in the political arena. Their first electoral tests (in 2022 and 2023) suggest that the success of the new player is much less than expected, and there is a risk for it to remain marginal, even before it has had a chance to develop and consolidate itself. To conclude, and beyond the specific political actors, it is emphasized that it is necessary to better incorporate effective public policies that, in turn, will make it possible to deal more effectively with rural shrinkage and rural depopulation in Spain.

Keywords Rural Shrinking · Rural Depopulation · Civil Society Platforms · Emptied Spain · Spain

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1 Introduction and Theoretical Framework: From Rural Shrinking to Public Policies

Population loss in Western countries is not a new issue. It is related to the changes in natural growth, with the increasing reduction of the birth rate, and the lack of “compensation” resulting from migratory flows (King, 2013; OECD, 2018; United Nations, 2001). In Europe, it is also a recurrent issue (Corselli-Fordblad & Strandell, 2020), closely connected with demographic aging, a matter of great concern for the European authorities, as highlighted, among many other documents, by the text adopted by the European Parliament, entitled “Old continent growing older - possibilities and challenges related to aging policy post 2020” (European Parliament, 2021). Depopulation is affecting specially to many rural areas. Thus, in the twentieth century, after the Second World War, in Western Europe, rural–urban migrations were of particular importance, in parallel with improvements in the mechanization of the countryside.

The combination of loss of young people through migration and the consequent increase in aging and reduction of birth rates has precipitated many rural regions into a downward spiral of demographic decline in recent decades. These eminently demographic processes do not occur in isolation. There are associated processes of economic decline and, often, social disarticulation, which are combined in a spiral of territorial decline, well captured under the concept of shrinking. Therefore, rural shrinkage and rural depopulation have become dominant trends in many rural regions, in the context of an increasing vicious cycle of rural marginalization and depopulation. Analysis of such processes and related policies comes from Japan (Kim, 2021), the USA (Nelson, 2021), The Netherlands (Bock & Haarstsen, 2021) (Bock & Haarstsen, 2021), Poland and Hungary (Czibere et al., 2021), Scotland (Clarke, 2021) or Spain (Pinilla & Sáez, 2021; Sáez, 2021), among others.

The detailed study “European Shrinking Rural Areas: Challenges, Actions and Perspectives for Territorial Governance” (Copus et al., 2020) highlights the extent and seriousness of these processes in Europe, as well as the more or less direct public policy responses. All of these have been facilitated by a previous effort of theoretical conceptualization from academia, which in turn has allowed both policy practitioners and policymakers to design more coherent discourses and policies to address rural shrinking processes.

Certainly, largely because of demographic changes in recent decades, characterized by such demographic shrinking processes (and especially in its remote rural regions), but also because of projections over the next decades, which highlight continuing depopulation processes in many peripheral regions, this has become a major policy challenge.

In this respect, a clear and conclusive key policy message highlighted that there are basically only two approaches for policymakers to tackle these phenomena in rural areas (ESPON, 2017). The first is “going for growth”, i.e., trying to reverse shrinking trends by providing incentives for population growth. The second is “coping with decline”, i.e., accepting shrinkage and implementing measures to adapt

to the economic and social consequences. Therefore, the key from the point of view of political decision-makers and the public policies they put in place will be how to manage the transition to new scenarios, in which there will be much less population, and for this, an economic base will have to be developed or stimulated that will have to be coherent with this new reality. That is to say, depopulation could (and perhaps should) coexist in the public policies' domain with efforts for economic development and greater social cohesion in these rural areas. In this sense, the ESPON report (2017) rightly points out that depopulation requires a new way of thinking about rural development that rethinks shrinkage not as a burden, but as a potential positive opportunity.

In a similar way, the analysis has been approached by differentiating between adaptation and mitigation policies (Copus et al., 2020). In the former, the objective would be to guarantee the well-being of rural inhabitants through the maintenance of a minimum level of services. In the latter, on the other hand, the objective is to stop demographic decline through policies to promote local development. One approach is not necessarily better than the other, but its suitability will depend on the circumstances of each area, and complementarities between them can even be envisaged. Thus, measures linked to the rural development policies of the Common Agricultural Policy, e.g., population retention through the livestock farmers' subsidy or mountain farming, would be more mitigation measures. Measures linked to cohesion policy, focusing on regional convergence and the development of the most disadvantaged regions through, for example, the improvement of infrastructure and equipment, would also fall within this approach. However, other measures under Pillar 2 of the CAP, such as the diversification of the rural economy and the improvement of living conditions in rural areas, are closer to the adaptation approach. However, as has been pointed out, these two approaches are not antagonistic or conflicting but complementary, as is the case with the place-based approach (which is at the heart of the traditional LEADER program, of what has subsequently been redrawn as Community Led Local Development—CLLD, and in the new CAP, as Participatory Local Development).

Spain is not very different from the dominant general trends in Europe, as outlined in the preceding paragraphs, although it does present some particularities (Font Garolera, 2023). Thus, it is true that territorial disparities in population distribution tend to be somewhat greater than in neighboring countries, with a higher concentration of population in inhabited areas and a higher proportion of rural territory with very low occupancy and, therefore, very low densities.

The situation in many of the inland rural regions is associated with an impoverished economic base, so that rural shrinking and depopulation are widespread in many of those areas. The more global vision of rural shrinking has been more addressed by rural development policies, mainly under the territorial approach of the LEADER program of the European Union (Esparcia et al., 2015). However, the specific issue of depopulation has emerged on the public agenda especially in the last 8–10 years (Esparcia, 2021; Ministerio de Política Territorial y Administración Pública, 2018). But rural depopulation in Spain is not such a recent phenomenon, having roots at least in the nineteenth century (Collantes & Pinilla, 2019; Sánchez Aguilera, 2020).

However, the most intense processes are linked to the time of the dictator Franco's developmentalism, mainly with his "Stabilization Plan" in 1959. Thus, the 1960s and 1970s are the era of developmentalism, being public policies based on a model of economic growth centered, on the one hand, on the industrial and urban growth of the country's major centers and, on the other, on an international opening based on sun and beach tourism. All this growth required a large workforce, which came mainly from the rural migration. In fact, at the same time, the combination of the crisis of traditional agriculture and the mechanization of the countryside was pushing out huge contingents of workers and surplus families. Therefore, this was also known as the era of the massive rural exodus, the first great wave of rural-urban migration (Banco de España, 2021; Gutiérrez Chacón et al., 2020).

During the 1990s, the depopulation of these inland rural areas slowed down, reaching the end of the century, when, coinciding with the end of the crisis of the early 1990s, Spain experienced a very significant wave of positive migratory flows (mainly from Eastern Europe and Latin America), which also affected rural areas. This arrival of new immigrants was particularly significant, but was stopped by the financial and economic crisis between 2008 and 2014. It was in the middle of this crisis period when migration flows in rural areas reversed, resulting in what is known as the second wave of depopulation in Spain.

Figure 1 provides a fairly good overview of the rural areas in which different types of depopulation processes are present and with different intensities (Recaño Valverde, 2017). Firstly, we have the rural areas of demographic resilience (almost 1,500 municipalities, 18 % of the national total), which are settlements of a relatively large size, densities higher than the average for rural Spain, with a certain demographic stability, masculinity only slightly higher than the national average, etc. Secondly, we have the rural areas of emigration (just over 1600 municipalities, 20%), which are characterized by high altitude, small demographic size (average around 175 inhabitants, with just over 6.2 inhabitants per km²), negative growth rates, a higher level of masculinity than the previous group, a high level of aging, and a very negative impact of emigration. Finally, in third place, there is a step where the situation is still more negative, the rural areas in which depopulation is practically irreversible (just over 1800 municipalities, 23%). They are characterized by very high altitude, very small size (barely 110 inhabitants, with only 4.3 inhabitants per km²), and very high aging (average age of 60, with almost 50% of their inhabitants over 65).

Therefore, while in the former areas rurality is important, but depopulation is fairly moderate, the situation in rural areas of the second and, above all, third type, highlights the fact that we are moving toward a significantly different scenario to that of previous decades, which necessarily has to be tackled in the field of public policies. It was awareness of this situation that set alarm bells ringing, with growing organization of the rural population into civic platforms calling for decisive action, and with public authorities, both national and regional, beginning to design measures and public policies to specifically address the situation (Esparcia, 2021). The exception was the regional government of Aragón (one of the regions where depopulation

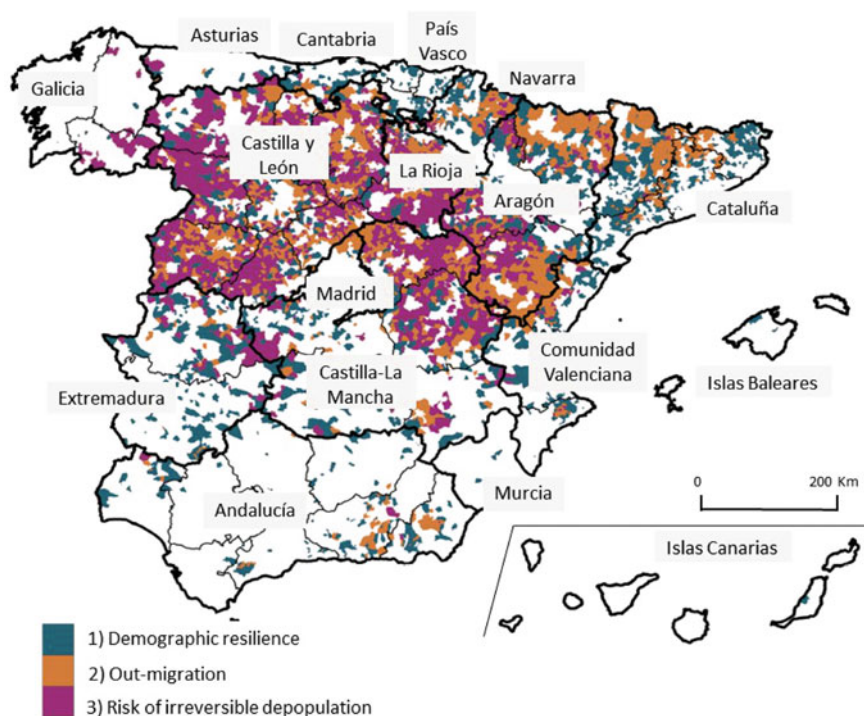


Fig. 1 Typology of rural areas in Spain (on a municipal basis), 2016. *Source* (Recaño Valverde, 2017) [The regions' names have been added by the author]

is most intense), which had started to design some measures at the beginning of the decade.

The discourses of most policymakers are often somewhere in between the objectives of providing the services necessary for the rural population to have welfare levels comparable to the urban population (adaptive public policy approach), on the one hand, and the objectives of stimulating economic development efforts (mitigative public policy approach), on the other. However, the discourses do not correspond to the practical implementation of policies, or at least to what should be a more effective implementation of them. Thus, both in the central government and in most regional governments, there is practically a divorce between policies against depopulation, on the one hand, and policies in favor of place-based rural development, on the other. This is due to the fact that both are under the responsibility of different ministries or general directorates, usually poorly connected.

Other aspects are also particularly important for an effective implementation of public policies against depopulation, which are not being addressed, or indeed publicly acknowledged with the necessary clarity. There is a certain reluctance, at least in political discourses, to accept two obvious facts which are decisive for development strategies and policies, as well as for the fight against depopulation and the

provision of services. On the one hand, the obvious fact that projections predict even more intense depopulation trends (Eurostat, 2021) in the coming decades in these peripheral rural areas. On the other hand, the fact is that in a large part of rural Spain there is already a real dysfunction in the settlement system (with a very high number of rural micro-settlements of less than 500 inhabitants, with a very poor provision of services and low levels of accessibility). All these factors question, for example, basic aspects of policies against depopulation. Therefore, public policies still have two unresolved issues: a more integrated approach of public policies for development and service provision, on the one hand, and a territorial vision, applying a comprehensive spatial planning perspective, on the other (Esparcia Pérez, 2023).

The intensity of the processes of rural and demographic shrinking, as well as the inconsistencies and delayed implementation of policies focused on tackling depopulation, has provided the perfect “breeding ground” to generate deep dissatisfaction among large groups of the rural population. The political party known as ‘Emptied Spain’ (*España Vacuada*) emerged recently in this context. Before continuing, it is necessary to make a brief clarification of the terms “Empty” and “Emptied Spain”, which are often incorrectly used as synonyms. The first is more neutral, referring only to the description of a situation of depopulation suffered by inland rural Spain. However, the second (emptied), adopted by the political party, is an attempt to denote that there have been policies that, at least through its indifference, have contributed to demographic emptying processes. Neither term has a scientific basis, but only a media basis. For this reason many scholars reject both terms. In this sense, F. Molinero has pointed out, “the term ‘emptied Spain’ is incorrect, inappropriate and even ridiculous”, being much more appropriate to use expressions such as “depopulated rural Spain” or “low-density rural Spain” (Montero, 2022), using expressions such as “depopulated rural Spain”, “low-density rural Spain”.

Thus, the rest of this chapter focuses on three aspects. Firstly, a review of the objectives, sources and methodology. Secondly, an analysis of the level of awareness that, at the national level, has grown among the Spanish population of the severity of rural depopulation in the country. Thirdly, analysis of the emergence of this political party and the political and media reactions it has generated. We conclude with some thoughts about the public policies on rural shrinking and the perspectives for the ‘Emptied Spain’, as well on some next steps for the research.

2 Objectives, Sources and Methodology

Many analyses are available on both socio-economic and political issues of development of rural regions. In recent years, these studies have been more specifically concerned with low-density rural Spain, which would correspond to the misnamed ‘Emptied Spain’ (Molinero & Alario, 2022). The analysis we intend to carry out here moves away from these objectives and focuses on one main aim. It refers to the role in the country’s political landscape of the phenomenon of depopulated rural Spain. Three aspects are particularly relevant to bear in mind. On the one hand,

from the political point of view, depopulated rural Spain is not only represented by a series of citizens' platforms, which have been emerging and some of which are very consolidated in part of rural Spain (especially, around 'Emptied Spain', as a political party). It also looks at how the other political parties have reacted to the emergence or development of these platforms. The second aspect to bear in mind is that we are dealing with a very young phenomenon ('Emptied Spain', which brings together these civic platforms of depopulated rural Spain, was registered as a political party in September 2019). As a result, there is very little analysis available from social scientists, and this conditions the available sources. The third important aspect to consider is that since the emergence of the political party, daily news (and part of the daily life of many people) has been dominated by the Covid-19 pandemic, first, and then by the effects of the Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This may have limited their presence in public-political life, or at least their media impact, falling short of what their promoters may have hoped for (given their great success in the years and months prior to their registration as a political party).

For the analysis of the political positioning of the different parties with respect to the phenomenon of depopulated rural Spain, the sources are diverse. It has been used, on the one hand, gray literature, in particular documents produced by the political parties (including their electoral programs and others in which they have set out their political positions with respect to depopulated rural Spain). On the other hand, we have carried out an analysis of some surveys commissioned by media companies such as the one by *Sociométrica*, for the newspaper *El Español*; *Agora Integral*, for the newspaper *Canarias Ahora* and *ElDiario.es* (Electrográfica, 2021a, 2021b), and *DYM Institute*, for HENNEO Group (Uría Molero, 2021). However, only the main results of these surveys are known. But, the importance of them is that all political parties have reacted to these results through the media. Thus, we monitored journalistic information and news on the subject, which in turn included actions, initiatives or reactions of political leaders with regard to depopulated rural Spain in general, and the phenomenon of depopulation in particular. Although there has not been a proliferation of extensive and detailed studies, work has been done with practically the only scientific survey on the irruption of 'Emptied Spain' and its possible effects on the Spanish political panorama.

The analysis has been completed with a set of interviews with policymakers from central and some regional governments; some members or regional parliaments, and representatives of several civic rural organizations.

As can be inferred from the above, from the methodological point of view, this paper has a qualitative, exploratory and interpretative approach. The object of analysis and the available sources limit the possibility of other types of analysis. Nevertheless, the available sources and the methodological approach are appropriate in view of the nature of the objectives pursued.

3 ‘Emptied Spain’: A Consistent New Political Player Coming from the Civil Society?

In this central section, we analyze, first, the emergence of the new political actor, ‘Emptied Spain’, coming from a large number of civic platforms in rural Spain. Second, the enormous expectations that its irruption into the political arena generated (2019–2021), including the possibility of holding the key to governability in the next general elections (initially scheduled for the end of 2023). Third, it analyzes how these expectations generated a strong counter-reaction from the traditional political parties, especially from the right and the ultra-right, and how the coalition government (socialist and parties to its left) internalized the discourse of the new actor and partly translated it into public policies. Finally, it analyzes how the various regional and national elections of 2022 and 2023 have meant that the enormous expectations of a year earlier had practically disappeared, leaving this newborn political actor (at least on a national scale) almost in political irrelevance.

3.1 *The Mobilization of Rural Civil Society, at the Root of the Emergence of ‘Emptied Spain’*

The processes of rural depopulation are already well known and have been analyzed for many years, more or less directly, from different disciplines. However, it must be acknowledged that hundreds of academic works have not succeeded in sufficiently creating awareness among public decision-makers or in mobilizing social conscience around this issue. In Spain, the placing of the issue on the public agenda is a recent phenomenon, barely a decade old. And it has been a social phenomenon for even less (González, 2021b). There are several milestones, which have possibly marked a before and after in the presence, first social, then political, of rural depopulation in Spain (Europa Press, 2021). Among them, two are particularly of interest.

The first milestone was the so-called “Revolt of ‘Emptied Spain’”, the demonstration that took place on March 31, 2019, in the country’s capital, Madrid, called by more than 90 civil society platforms, which had a massive support (around 100,000 according to the organizers), and which was echoed by practically all the social media, even having an international media resonance, with headlines such as “The ‘Revolt of Empty Spain’: Why is Spain’s rural world protesting?” (Rodríguez Martínez et al., 2019); “In Spain’s election, the emptying countryside matters” (The Economist, 2019); “‘Empty Spain’: country grapples with towns fading from the map” (Jones, 2019); “Thousands march in Spain to demand more help for rural areas” (The Associated Press, 2019); “*L’Espagne rurale et ‘vidée’ manifeste et fait le plein à Madrid*” — Rural and ‘emptied’ Spain demonstrates and fills up in Madrid—(Ouest-France, March 31st 2019); or “*La Spagna “svuotata” in piazza a Madrid: oltre 50mila per lo sviluppo delle aree rurali*” —Spain ‘emptied’ in the streets of Madrid: over 50,000 for the development of rural areas—(Pasqualini, 2019).

The “Revolt of ‘Emptied Spain’” remains in the collective imaginary of Spanish people, and since then, the media have been paying more attention to rural shrinkage, even with more specific tv and radio programs closely related to that rural Spain. Among all these associations, the two with the longest tradition and most prominent presence are operating in two of the most depopulated rural provinces in the country, Teruel (with ‘Teruel Exists’—*Teruel Existe*—) and Soria (with ‘Soria now!’—*Soria ¡Ya!*—). Both civic platforms are the nucleus around which the whole movement in the country has grown. They started representing years ago the growing disenchantment from remote rural areas, not only because of depopulation, but also because they do not perceive that there is sufficient attention from the traditional political parties and, above all, from the public administrations, governed at one time or another by such parties, either at the national level or in the different regions (Jones, 2019).

The second milestone that is important to note is the arrival at the top of politics of one of these platforms, *Teruel Existe*, which won a deputy and two senators in the national elections of November 2019. Its representative in the Congress of Deputies, MP T. Guitarte, would probably have gone unnoticed without the confluence of a series of circumstances, which made his vote decisive for the investiture of Pedro Sánchez as president of the government in the 14th legislature, in January 2020.

The culmination and confluence of both milestones took place during 2021. First, the document of 101 measures to “join and structure the Spanish territory” was presented (España Vacía, 2021), shortly after the government presented its Plan of 130 measures to tackle depopulation (La Moncloa, 2021; MITECO, 2022). With this document, the platform wanted to avoid criticisms of a lack of discourse, or a simplistic discourse focused on simply demanding improvements in infrastructures. The next step was the decision taken by the more than 160 associations, from 28 provinces, on the occasion of their third General Assembly, to take the jump into the political arena, with the experience and success of *Teruel Existe* as a reference point. Days later, on September 30, 2021, *España Vacía* registered as a political party in the Ministry of the Home Affairs (with headquarters in Alcañiz, Teruel, one of the provinces with the greatest depopulation problems in Spain).

‘Emptied Spain’ will be able to choose between two options to compete in the elections, as a political party or as an electoral association. In the last regional elections (Castilla y León and Andalucía), they have run as an electoral association. This way means that each association or group of associations runs with its own name in its respective electoral circumscription, the province, to later converge in the parliament. In fact, at the end of 2022, ‘Emptied Spain’ has become a federation of parties, i.e., it is already putting in place all the instruments to have the maximum room for maneuver in the run-up to the 2023 electoral year.

In any case, it seems clear that there is no turning back from the fact that, at least for several years, part of the debate, and the political struggle on behalf of the badly so-called ‘Emptied Spain’ has been served (Armunia Berges, 2021; Gil Grande, 2021; La Sexta, 2021).

3.2 “First Alarm Bells Ringing”: Excellent Election Results Predicted for ‘Emptied Spain’

Following the confirmation, in November 2021, that ‘Emptied Spain’ will compete in the next general elections (planned for the end of 2023), political parties and the media have begun to carry out surveys and calculations to find out what the electoral impact of this change in the political scene might be. Thus, for example, in one of these polls (Uría Molero, 2021), 42% of those surveyed said that a candidature focused on the interests of rural areas would be “beneficial” or “very beneficial” in the national political scene. Only 14% would see it as “detrimental” or “very detrimental”. And it is striking that almost half of the left-wing voters are the most in favor of such a candidature (including both the Socialist Party and those of its left, ‘Together We Can’—*Unidas Podemos*—, which is a coalition between the traditional ‘*Izquierda Unida*’—United Left—party and the new party, ‘Podemos’, that emerged from the citizens’ movements in 2014, placed to the left of the Socialist Party). Meanwhile, right-wing voters (conservative Popular Party and the far-right party, *Vox*) are in favor by around a third, but are also the most against it, at around a fifth.

Another poll, which has been echoed by many media (El Español, 2021), predicts just 1.1% of the national vote for ‘Emptied Spain’, concentrated in provinces of what is considered to be “depopulated Spain” (Bandrés & Azón, 2021). This could result in as many as 15 seats in the Congress of Deputies (Lower House of Parliament). These 15 MPs would be the result of a transfer of votes mainly from the Popular and Socialist parties, and, in a lesser extent, the far-right party *Vox*. Therefore, it would “steal” more votes from the political right than from the left. On the other hand, the 15 MPs would be enough to formally constitute a parliamentary group, which means that important advantages in terms of parliamentary (and also media) presence and visibility and, more importantly, could be decisive in the formation of the new government.

Figure 2 shows that the vote for the ‘Emptied Spain’ is logically located in the most depopulated Spain. However, there are also provinces in depopulated Spain where the civic platforms of ‘Emptied Spain’ do not seem to have sufficient presence to win a deputy. In some cases, the strong urban influence nearby is a determining factor (as in the case of Guadalajara, which in the western part is an expansion zone of the Madrid metropolitan area, although depopulation remains quite significant in the rest of the province). In others (such as Albacete, Ciudad Real and Córdoba), civic platforms have not emerged, given the predominance of an agrarian and, in some areas, industrial awareness (which does not prevent the spread of a certain awareness of the crisis, but little linked to the idea of depopulation).

In any case, the results seem quite clear, at least in the sense that ‘Emptied Spain’ (and its platforms) would be present in a large part of “depopulated Spain”. And the fact is that these predictions have sounded an alarm bell in the political landscape, and all political parties have reacted to this eventuality in the national elections, scheduled for the end of 2023.

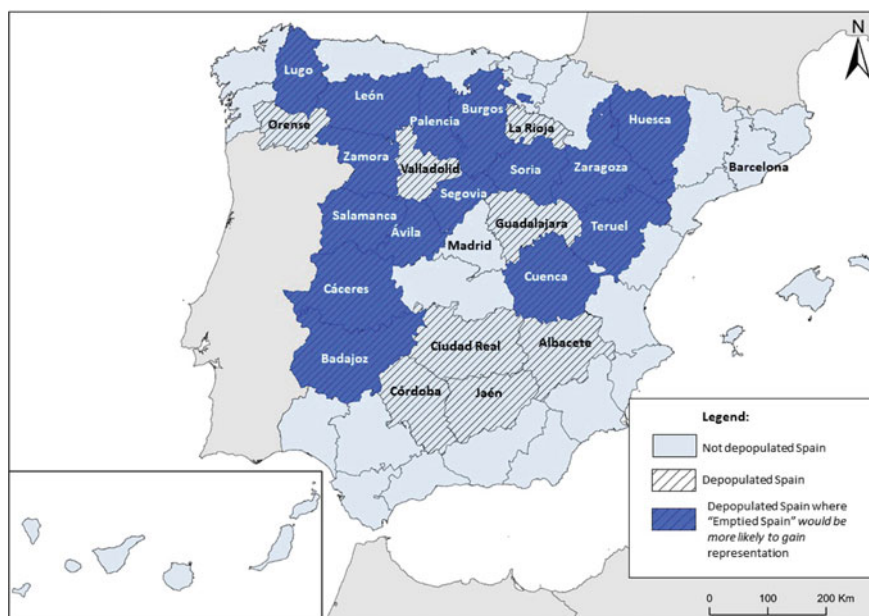


Fig. 2 Electoral circumscriptions (provinces) in which ‘Emptied Spain’ could obtain MPs in the Congress of Deputies. *Source* Prepared by C. Losilla based on the results of the Sociométrica Survey (El Español, 2021), and (Bandrés & Azón, 2021)

Around the same dates, another poll was carried out, with much less media coverage (Electrografica, 2021b). The results were also much more modest, but still important, giving eight MPs, although it would not be so clear that they could obtain a parliamentary group (5 MPs are needed, plus 5% of the votes in whole country, or 15% in the electoral circumscriptions in which they could compete).

The possible irruption of ‘Emptied Spain’ in the national parliament, conditioning the country’s governability, continues to worry all political parties in 2023, that it was to be an electoral year in Spain (regional and local in May and national election scheduled for November). The right-wing media continues to warn of this danger, agreeing on the figure of 15 MPs (although based more on qualitative assessments than on a rigorous scientific study) (Campo, 2022; Morodo, 2023). They insist a lot on the “pernicious” effects of D’Hont rule for national parties, and the advantage of ‘Emptied Spain’ (in the 2019 elections, it meant an average of just under 49,000 votes to obtain an MP in depopulated Spain, and almost 86,000 in the rest of the electoral circumscriptions).

Some analysts pointed out, however, that it would be the socialist party that could be most damaged. In any case, what the analysts agreed on is the enormous volatility of the vote, and that the greater or lesser number of votes for any political option will depend on the central or dominant issue that each voter has in mind at the time of voting (Campo, 2022). In this sense, the challenge for rural Spain platforms was

to keep depopulation as a central issue, while conveying the idea that only through them would this issue be adequately addressed by public policies. In the meantime, there are already strategies, for example, to encourage students not to change their voting place from the villages to the cities where their universities are located. The slogans try to appeal to pragmatism as well as feelings: “If you live in Madrid, decide in Madrid” (left-wing Partido Mas Madrid), as opposed to “If you are from Empty Spain, you live in Madrid, but you still feel your land and want to return to it, stay registered in your city or town. In that way you will be able to decide its future” (‘Emptied Spain’) (Ortiz, 2023).

3.3 The Reaction and Positioning of Political Parties in Relation to ‘Emptied Spain’ and the Problems of Depopulated Spain

All political parties are aware of the importance of messages about rural Spain in general, and depopulated rural Spain in particular, and have therefore developed more or less explicit or elaborate arguments and strategies (20minutos, 2019; Campo, 2022; Morodo, 2023). There is a common element in the position of the major political parties: the concern that the arrival of ‘Emptied Spain’ to Parliament would imply an increase of the fragmentation (EFE News, 2021). From their point of view, this would mean greater difficulties for governing and, ultimately, for forming a government (Rodríguez, 2021). This is the argument put forward (more implicitly than explicitly) by the three main parties with the greatest presence in depopulated Spain (the conservative Popular Party, the Socialist Party and the far-right *Vox*). But, each has approached depopulation differently and holds different positions.

Thus, for example, the far-right party (*Vox*) has had an important advantage, starting from its strong presence in Andalucía (a region with an important agrarian base), to spread throughout depopulated Spain (especially Castilla-La Mancha, Castilla y León and Aragón): the high level of masculinization that predominates in many of these villages (González, 2021a). At present, *Vox* continues to deploy what some media refer to as a ‘plan at the bar’ to gain weight in the rural areas, intensifying its structures in the villages through a network of volunteers spread throughout the country (Morillo, 2021). In this party, they consider that 30% of the country’s vote is in rural Spain, and they want to play a strong role, especially in Andalucía (although not only). Their arguments go beyond ideology (although they are not exempt from it) and focus on capturing this disenchantment and, what they even take care to stimulate, the supposed weariness with respect to the traditional parties. They resort to idyllic images of traditional agriculture, hunting or bullfighting (both in terms of the supposed “national festival” and the breeding of brave bulls), which mobilizes not only feelings, hobbies, passions, but also a large amount of money from which, directly or indirectly, many families live or benefit.

However, some changes have occurred in two regional elections in 2022. First, the absolute majority achieved by the Partido Popular in Andalucía has left Vox without decision-making capacity, despite the slight improvement in its results. This decision-making power has been strengthened, however, in Castilla y León (where it governs in coalition with the Popular Party).

In the conservative Popular Party, the main issue regarding depopulation was summarized in the electoral program of the last general elections, in the proposal for a Development Plan for Rural Spain (Partido Popular, 2019). This should be aimed at promoting economic activity, diversification, job creation and entrepreneurship. Additionally, it promised to address public transport programs, such as transport on demand, as well as to include the rural perspective in legislation, in addition to more generic issues such as improved tax treatment (reduction of land and farm transfer costs, grouping of rural properties, etc.).

However, it does not seem to have been able to elaborate a simple, clear discourse that is attracting the electorate, beyond a certain degree of follow-through of some of Vox's key messages. Nonetheless, some pro-Popular Party media have taken it upon themselves to point out the danger that a greater fragmentation of the vote (whose beneficiary, from their point of view, would be the Socialist Party) could represent for this party. They also point out that a large part of rural Spain is an area that tends to favor the center-right (ABC, 2021). This last aspect is not entirely true, because, for example, in the region of Andalucía, the vote for the Popular Party has traditionally been mainly an urban vote. The latest elections (2022) have changed this traditional picture somewhat.

In any case, direct attacks on 'Emptied Spain' have soon come, with headlines such as "*'Emptied Spain' against the Popular Party. Rural Spain deserves as much attention as escaping the manipulation of 'Emptied Spain'*" (Vilches, 2021). The author of this headline writes, moreover, "*the Spain of the caciques is back, those 'caciques' of the Restoration era who, thanks to their contacts in Madrid, were able to obtain local benefits. In exchange, the cacique got the locals to vote for the government candidate of the day ...*". The political analysis in this newspaper article also alerts the parties on the right to the potential danger of the new party, which, according to the author, would be drawn from the left and would agree on equal terms with the socialist party rather than with the Popular Party. Therefore, in order to counteract the maneuver, he shows the way forward for the Popular Party and even suggests a slogan to be used against 'Emptied Spain'.

In a similar vein, the editor of the digital *El Español* himself described 'Emptied Spain' as a "populist, demagogic, opportunistic movement based on the segmentation of democracy", and criticized the cross-cutting demand for a rural perspective in the regulations made by 'Emptied Spain', and warned of the supposed danger that, in the next general elections, the government could be constituted and supported by those who "undertake to better defend the interests of the least populated provinces". Here, too, he points out the path that the Socialist Party and the Popular Party should follow: first, to reach an agreement to manage European funds, alleviating social discontent; and second, to reform the Electoral Law and avoid being captured by 1% of the electorate, the foreseeable voters of 'Emptied Spain' (Ramírez, 2021).

Certainly, beyond the manipulated and inappropriate comparison of ‘Emptied Spain’ with other events, these words do not seem compatible with a true exercise of democracy. Following this line of argument, the same media outlet even goes so far as to question, albeit not explicitly, the legitimacy of the existence of ‘Emptied Spain’, pointing out that the question is not to speculate on the role it might play on the political scene (in allusion to the results of the polls), but even whether it should exist at all. Thus, under the headline “Spain emptied (of representation)”, it argues that “*Parliament cannot become a souk without national conscience and common sense where the deputies take from the national budget whatever their votes weigh. ‘Emptied Spain’ will not solve any problems for its voters and will contribute to aggravating the existing ones*” (El Español, 2021).

Therefore, it is clear that, in the absence of greater arguments and ideas on the part of the political right, the media right has taken on the role of wearing down and discrediting a political force, with which one can agree more or less, and whose legitimacy as a representative force is even doubted (a tactic, that of delegitimizing the political opponents, which, moreover, is already well known from Trumpism and increasingly used, in Spain and other countries, by conservative and extreme right-wing parties) (Saramo, 2017).

In an almost diametrically opposed context, the Socialist Party has been more explicit and ambitious than the right-wing parties in its electoral proposals, with a specific section on the demographic challenge in rural areas in the last electoral program (PSOE, 2019). It raised issues such as the approval of the National Strategy against the demographic challenge, the improvement of broadband connectivity throughout the territory, the full application of the current Rural Development Law or the introduction of territorial criteria to reduce inequalities between rural and urban areas. It introduced some issues, such as the need to carry out an inventory of real estate and rural property in “dead hands”, and its subsequent mobilization to encourage population fixation, the promotion of investment in rail infrastructure and suburban trains, etc.

Some of these ideas have subsequently appeared, with similar approaches, in the Development Model by ‘Emptied Spain’. The fundamental difference is that the Socialist Party is implementing some of these proposals, such as the ‘Strategy against the demographic challenge’. Others proposals, however, are far behind schedule, such as the review and implementation of the Law for the Sustainable Development of the Rural Environment or the creation of Regional Offices for Territorial Cohesion. This last instrument was part of the government agreement with “Together We Can”—*Unidas Podemos*—, and also a promise to ‘Teruel Exist’ for tis support. Thus, President Pedro Sánchez, referring to the economic recovery of disadvantaged and marginalized areas, stated in his speech that the government was going to “*create depopulation offices in at least 20 rural districts that require urgent intervention. Their function will be to support people or companies that want to establish businesses in the area, facilitating contacts and mediation in the process*” (Moncloa, 2020). Although practically nothing has been heard of these offices, it is true, however, that the government has developed a very intense activity in everything related to the demographic challenge and rural depopulation, as have done

many of the regions governed by the Socialist Party, alone or in coalition (Esparcia, 2021). A good example of this is the Plan of 130 measures, in which the government has committed itself to investing 10,000 million euros by the end of 2023 (from the Recovery Funds).

On the other hand, the party ‘Together We Can’—*Unidas Podemos*—had traditionally remained somewhat distant from the issue of rural depopulation, at least from the point of view of its presence in the media. However, partly coinciding with the emergence of ‘Emptied Spain’, it has intensified its public presence and interventions related to depopulated rural Spain. This can be seen, for example, in the policy document resulting from its reflection forum (held in October 2021), entitled ‘Compass to win this decade’ (Podemos, 2021), which introduces some policy proposals and sets as one of its objectives developing ‘Emptied Spain’ (Chouza, 2021a). From the point of view of their strategy, they recognize the need for a greater public presence and, above all, to highlight the work of their members over the last few years in the different institutions in or linked to the rural areas. All of these are intended to be carried out at the same time as redoubling efforts in the institutions in which it is present, from regional parliaments to town councils, within the framework of a strategy and effort to mobilize its members being representatives at municipalities, with the aim of doing battle in the next municipal and regional elections (planned for mid-2023). Among many other initiatives, the municipalism meeting that took place in December 2021 was one of the responses to this objective.

That same objective is behind the tour of some party’s leaders through different provinces during the last months of 2021, explaining its ‘strategic commitment’ and proposals to combat depopulation. An expressive newspaper headline (‘*Podemos*’ moves to catch empty Spain’) highlights the renewed strategy of this political party, starting, not by chance, with a tour through Castilla y León, one of the regions with the greatest depopulation problems, where ‘Emptied Spain’ has a good social base, and where it also sought to fight the next electoral battles (Chouza, 2021b). Results of regional election (beginning of 2022) highlight that the party has not succeeded in this strategy (having been left with only one representative, out of the 10 obtained in 2015).

In the proposals of the ‘Together We Can’—*Unidas Podemos*—, there is an effort toward the idea of mainstreaming that they want to introduce in the different policies, as well as other more specific ones that, to some extent, are partially in line with measures that are being implemented or developed by the central government (a coalition between Socialist Party and ‘Together We Can’—*Unidas Podemos*—). However, it is also clear that this party wants to give them their own and differentiated character (Europa Press, 2021). This is the case, for example, of the commitment for a home care model for the elderly instead of the traditional residential model, or the installation of renewable energy plants, always respecting the will of local communities and open to the participation of local agents (with compensation mechanisms for the local population, such as lower electricity supply prices). Some of these ideas are, however, shared by other formations (for example, by ‘Emptied Spain’ itself), in their general approach.

3.4 *Toward the Irrelevance of ‘Emptied Spain’ in the Political Arena?*

The socio-political context, favorable to the new political actor during the years 2019–2021, experiences a substantial change in 2022 and, above all, in 2023. Indeed, the electoral elections of 2022 and 2023 have been dominated by a strong political polarization and an extreme simplification of the political debate, largely dominated by a great misinformation and deviation of attention from relevant issues, among them, depopulation and the new territorial model toward which Spain is irremediably advancing. The comparatively good economic results of the country (with inflation figures below those of many European countries, very high rates of job creation, or extension of social protection systems, among others) have not avoided this atmosphere of political polarization and strong media presence of erratic discourses that are quite unfocused on the real problems. In this context, the poor electoral results have led some analysts to point out that ‘Emptied Spain’ is a seriously weakened political player, both at regional and national scales, even before it has been able to grow and consolidate in the political arena. Some data can illustrate this idea.

Indeed, the main objective for ‘Emptied Spain’ was to participate in the 2023 general elections. However, they understood that they could not stay away from regional elections, especially in regions where depopulation is a central issue, such as Castilla y León, Aragón, Galicia, Asturias or La Rioja, although it is starting to be an emerging issue in other regions, such as Andalusia or the Region of Valencia. Due to the regional political situation, the elections in Castilla y León and Andalusia were brought forward from the planned dates (and took place in February and June 2022, respectively).

Although ‘Emptied Spain’ had little time to properly implement the different electoral platforms, candidatures were presented in five of the nine provinces of Castilla y León, and in one of the eight provinces of Andalusia. In other provinces, the grassroots civic associations were very young, with no tradition of presence in civil society, and in some cases, when it came to shaping the electoral platform, some defectors or members who had left other parties (as in the case of Valladolid) infiltrated the electoral platform.

In Andalusia, it was candidacy in just one province (‘Jaén Deserves More’—*Jaén Merece Más*—), obtaining almost 6% of the votes (15% in the city capital of the province, that is, higher the urban vote than the rural one). However, this result was not high enough to gain representation in the regional parliament. In spite of that, its leaders value positively the response of the voters, which could be the starting point to consolidate the civil platform in the future.

It was in Castilla y León that ‘Emptied Spain’ had the highest expectations. The overall results show that several of the electoral platforms were not yet ready, largely due to the youth of the civic associations promoting them and their limited presence in their respective provinces. Thus, the percentages of votes in their provinces were low in many of them, such as *Vía Burgalesa* (just under 6%, in fifth position), ‘Emptied Spain’ in Palencia (2.5%, sixth position), Salamanca (almost 2%, in sixth position)

or Valladolid (1.6%, sixth position). The counterpart came from the Soria platform (Soria Now! —*Soria ¡Ya!*—), which managed to be the most voted party in the province (with almost 43% of the votes), obtaining three of the five representatives in the whole province. Undoubtedly, this was a great success, which counterbalances the poor results of the other electoral platforms of ‘Emptied Spain’ in the rest of the provinces. The three deputies in the regional parliament of Castilla y León have not been decisive in forming the government, due to the coalition government between the conservative Popular Party and the far-right *Vox*. Therefore, although ‘Emptied Spain’ can play an active role in the parliament, their visibility will be partially limited.

In the 2023 regional elections, the situation has not improved for ‘Emptied Spain’'s platforms. The only region where they had a strong presence was Aragón. Here the same situation as in Castilla y León has been observed in the 2023 regional elections. The regional platform (Aragón Exist—‘*Aragón Existe*’—), which has entered the regional parliament for the first time (fifth position, with 5% of the votes and three deputies), has not managed to be decisive in the formation of the government, given the right-wing and far-right block’s absolute majority. In other regions, the various platforms have remained outside the regional parliaments, generally quite far from being represented (Asturias, Castilla-La Mancha, Extremadura), and only in one case have they come close to entering the regional parliament (La Rioja), but this would have been equally insufficient in the face of the absolute majority of the right-wing block.

In the 2023 general elections, the failure of ‘Emptied Spain’ to achieve its goal of entering and being decisive in the national parliament, as was evident from the polls two years earlier, was already expected (Calabrés, 2023; Electrografica, 2023) and confirmed by the obtained results (Arnal, 2023; Hoy Aragón, 2023). Indeed, none of the platforms have achieved representation in their respective constituencies (‘Emptied Spain’ competed in ten provinces), in most cases remaining far from gaining representation, with voting percentages usually below 2%. There are only two notable exceptions, the provinces of Teruel and Soria (with 15% and 19% of the vote, respectively). In these provinces, despite being considered the origin of the ‘Emptied Spain’, they have not been able to obtain representation either (although in the case of Teruel they came within 2000 votes of doing so). Surely, if they had obtained at least two deputies in the national parliament, the visibility and prominence of ‘Emptied Spain’ on a national scale would have been assured.

Therefore, in response to the question posed in this section, it can be said that yes, there is indeed a serious risk that these electoral results will lead to the death of ‘Emptied Spain’, at least as a relevant political actor. However, this does not mean that they will not continue to play an important role as civic platforms, although on a practically local (provincial) scale.

4 Some Conclusions: From National Politics to a Long-Term Comprehensive View of Rural Shrinkage from Public Policies

4.1 *Many Weaknesses and Few Strengths for the Consolidation of ‘Emptied Spain’ in National Politics*

As noted above, in depopulated rural Spain, a large number of platforms have emerged from civil society (some of which have managed to integrate actors as varied as trade unions and employers). These platforms took the decision to step out of their “comfort zone” and enter the political arena, which entailed significant risks, but also responded to a growing dissatisfaction with the response of political parties and with the policies that both the right and the left have been putting into practice. The results so far, in elections to regional parliaments in 2002 and 2023, and national election in 2023, have shown that gaining parliamentary representation, and having the possibility to “make politics”, was not an easy or quick path. In fact, the results in the elections to the national Parliament (July 2023) are qualified as a clear failure, given that they have not obtained any deputies (Arnal, 2023; Hoy Aragón, 2023). However, the presence in the regional parliaments, although not decisive, does seem to allow the two platforms with more trajectory, more consolidated and with important and recognizable leaderships (*¡Soria Ya!* and *Aragón Existe*—the regional civic platform from the provincial one, *Teruel Existe*-) to maintain and, perhaps, consolidate themselves for the future. This means that the visibility of ‘Emptied Spain’ is currently restricted to these two regions (Castilla y León and Aragón) and, moreover, limited due to the fact that they have no influence on governance.

The failure of ‘Emptied Spain’ in the last regional and, mainly, national elections, has led them to a scenario of great uncertainty, so that if they do not consolidate and strengthen their position in the coming time, they run a serious risk of remaining politically irrelevant, or even disappearing, at least as a political actor in the national arena. It seems obvious that ‘Emptied Spain’ has been the victim, in the first place, of the strong political polarization induced, above all, by the parties of the right and extreme right. This polarization has increased in recent years, attracting the “useful vote” toward the large traditional parties. In fact, this polarization has also damaged other political parties, in electoral terms, both on the extreme right and parties to the left of the Socialist Party. A second—probably minor—factor that may have influenced the failure of ‘Emptied Spain’ is the bringing forward of the elections to June 2023 (initially planned for December of the same year), which has meant that the platforms of ‘Emptied Spain’ were not sufficiently well prepared for the electoral competition. This electoral advance has favored that political polarization, as the general elections were planned around the idea of stopping and preventing a right-wing government that was almost necessarily expected to include the extreme right (as was happening in several regions, following the results of last regional elections).

In this context, the debate on depopulation has certainly been largely ignored by a large part of the population, hence the poor results.

A third factor, of a more structural nature and which may significantly hinder the visibility of 'Emptied Spain', refers to the incorporation of the depopulation discourse by practically all the national political parties, even though with different orientations, conceptions, nuances and emphasis. Furthermore, both the national government and practically all regional governments (both on the left and on the right), more or less accurately and consistently, have incorporated policies that, at least formally in all cases, seek to address depopulation, which may also contribute to the weakening of 'Emptied Spain' as political actor. The best example of these policies incorporating part of the discourse of 'Emptied Spain' is the investment policy in rural areas implemented by the first coalition government led by the Socialist Party (2019–2023), taking advantage of the enormous availability of Next Generation funds. The most noteworthy has been the Plan of 130 measures, which promised an investment of 10,000 million euros until December 2023 for this objective (MITECO, 2022; Boya, 2023). It is true that a major part of these investments has been carried out by 2023, but there is still a lack of sufficient temporal perspective to assess their effectiveness in relation to the planned objectives. In the case of the regional governments, practically all of them have also deployed policies against depopulation (Esparcia, 2021), at least until the years 2022–2023. It does not seem that the change of political color in several of these governments, as a result of the regional elections of these years, will entail a complete dismantling of that legal and regulatory framework.

In this context, the future for Empty Spain is uncertain, and it does not seem that it will be possible to recover, at least in the short or medium term, the spirit and mobilization capacity of the March 2019 demonstration. With the exception of the two main platforms (*¡Soria Ya!* and *Teruel—Aragón—Existe*), the rest of the civic platforms are still very young, without sufficient tradition, reduced implantation and, above all, without consistent leadership. Thus, only these two main platforms seem to be still sufficiently strong, and their presence in the regional parliaments of Castilla y León and Aragón (although not decisive according to the latest regional elections) may help them to remain active and to redouble their efforts for future elections.

The future of 'Emptied Spain' will probably depend on the combination of several factors. On the one hand, the work that these platforms can develop in their respective regional parliaments, and the visibility that this may have in the face of public opinion. On the other hand, the future for 'Emptied Spain' will depend on the maintenance of the level of awareness among citizens, about the problems of depopulated Spain, as reflected in the surveys of the Center for Sociological Research (CIS, 2023).

4.2 From the Too Narrow View of Depopulating Rural Regions to the Need for a Comprehensive View of Rural Shrinkage from Public Policies

The greater or lesser presence of political parties that appeal to discontent, but also to rural dignity and pride, such as the platforms of ‘Emptied Spain’, implied possible changes in the political landscape. However, equally or more important than that their presence is the conception, explicit or implicit, that the different parties have of how to tackle rural shrinking and depopulation from public policies. And here there is still a major deficit, as has been seen from reading his discourses and policy approaches.

There are at least two fields that should be given special consideration in a more comprehensive approach to the structural policies needed in these rural areas (ESPON, 2017). First field is related to local productive systems, which are indeed strategic (employment, incomes, demand of products, etc.). These rural areas have lost not only population, but also skills and talent, which may seriously compromise the capacity for innovation in their local productive systems. On the other hand, where these productive systems have to resort to low-skilled labor, the presence of immigration is higher, which is positive in terms of the number of inhabitants, but it is necessary to integrate this population well in order to avoid problems of social cohesion.

Second key field is related to the local governance. A good quality of it can also provide a favorable framework for productive development and innovation. Despite these potentialities, the Spanish administrative system is based on a large number of micro-municipalities, with very limited financial capacity to provide the necessary services to the rural population. Provincial governments have among their responsibilities to contribute significantly to the provision of these services, but the reduced inter-municipal cooperation greatly limits the effectiveness of such measures. The supra-municipal approach is strategic to activate and reinforce existing territorial cooperation instruments (commonwealths, LEADER local action groups, etc.), which is the most appropriate way for a more effective implementation of both service provision, local development and entrepreneurship policies.

Most importantly, however, policymakers need to be aware of the need to change the public policy paradigm. Apart from the possibility of doing nothing (which is still a political option), we can distinguish three approaches that policymakers should be clear about, in terms of their nature, advantages and disadvantages.

The first approach is that of “going for growth,” which focuses on attempting to reverse demographic decline trends through incentives for population growth, especially birth rates (but not so much on stimulating immigration). This is a politically conservative option, and in fact, some regional governments in Spain, usually under the control of the conservative Popular Party, pay special attention to measures to promote birth rates. Some new governments have emerged from the last regional elections (2023), under the right-wing and extreme-right wing win political parties are already implementing this type of conception. However, experience is showing

that, in remote rural regions with high depopulation, this demographic approach is totally useless.

A second approach focuses on adaptive strategies, seemingly less politically conservative (in fact, this is where many progressive, as well as conservative, governments have settled, as if it was the most effective way to tackle depopulation). These strategies aim to improve the quality of life of different groups of residents (young, elderly, seasonal visitors, etc.), mainly through the provision of services. Here, there may be latent conflicts, in particular between the different needs and demands of permanent and seasonal residents.

A third approach would be “coping with decline”, which focuses on accepting rural decline and mitigating its economic and social consequences through measures based on the mobilization of local resources, development and productive innovation, productive differentiation, social innovation, digitalization, territorial competitiveness based on ecosystem services and green economy, etc. Talent retention and, where appropriate, the social integration of immigrants (usually low-skilled) are also central aspects. This is an approach considered radical, but not necessarily implemented by the political left.

There are some public policies installed in the most useless option, the purely demographically natalist one (in which, moreover, hardly very few attentions are paid to immigration as a possible stimulus to local productive systems). However, most fall between the second and third approaches, although with more attention to adaptive aspects (provision of services), and less to mitigation (stimulating economic development). In this context, national and regional governments still have important pending challenges. The first one is to conduct a correct diagnosis and design of public policies to combat depopulation in terms of contents and—new—governance, putting territorial cohesion in the center (Pinilla & Sáez, 2021). The second one is to effectively integrate and articulate those policies against depopulation and those oriented toward rural shrinkage which, to date and in practically all cases, are inexplicably implemented in parallel with very little or no coordination. To this end, policies against depopulation (which inadequately are conceived more from a classic top-down perspective) should introduce and adopt the territorial perspective of place-based rural development policies (for example, by giving more prominence to supra-municipal governance instruments, such as LEADER local action groups) (Navarro-Valverde et al., 2021).

The third challenge, in a more holistic perspective, is strategic and consists that the political leaders understand the new paradigm, assimilate it, explain it clearly and courageously build long-term strategies in response to the new scenarios (less population, fewer settlements, lower overall densities, greater distances to service centers, etc.). To this end, it is essential to conceive rural shrinkage not as a problem, but from the perspective of its opportunities.

Politics is often highly volatile, and significant changes in the political landscape can occur in relation to elections, or on the occasion of specific election. Still, from the research point of view and in the short to medium term, it will be worthwhile to follow up this large civil society movement, ‘Emptied Spain’. Although it appears that it may remain in a marginal position in the near future, it is nevertheless a true

experiment in the Spanish political panorama, with no correspondence to any other in neighboring countries. Likewise, in the medium and long term, it will be necessary to evaluate the results and impacts of the public policies against depopulation that are being implemented and to assess the extent to which progress is being made toward an effective integration of the different perspectives, especially by articulating policies against depopulation within the strategic framework of policies focused on promoting the development of depopulating and shrinking rural areas.

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How Do Local Action Groups Connect to External Development Institutions? A Webometric Analysis in Digital and Geographical Space



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Abstract Local Action Groups (LAGs) are area-based cross-sectoral partnerships in receipt of European Union (EU) funding, grouping inhabitants and organizations working for local development and solving local problems. LAGs usually run their own websites informing about various activities of local communities and the possibility of obtaining funds for local projects. In our research, we analyzed Internet hyperlinks leading from LAG websites to websites of external institutions (non-members of LAGs). The main objective was to assess which non-member external organizations dealing with rural development issues are considered by LAGs as the most important sources of information and proposed as of potential interest to website visitors. The research covered all of 324 LAG websites existing in Poland in 2021 and hyperlinks led to websites of 313 external institutions (including other LAGs). A basic network analysis of the collected data was performed, with particular emphasis on the geographical location of the institutions to which the links lead. The average number of external organizations, whose homepages had been proposed through hyperlinks, was low—less than five per LAG. Only 19 LAG proposed websites of 10 or more external organizations. The websites of national government institutions supervising financing or supporting LAGs located in Warsaw, such as the Ministry

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of Agriculture and Rural Development (179) and the Agency for Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture (174), were the most frequently recommended. Links to information portals of the EU were ranked fourth (only from 32 LAG websites). The relatively high number of hyperlinks also led to portals run or supervised by regional self-governments (Marshal's Offices). Analysis shows that LAGs focus mainly on providing information related to the redistribution of EU funds under Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) approach supporting local projects (most often the Rural Development Programme). LAGs are a weak intermediary in communicating information about the EU, its objectives and its regional policy. They also poorly inform about other organizations and programmes supporting local development and social activity. This indicates a high dependence of LAGs on the UE financing of the CLLD approach.

Keywords Rural development · Area-based partnership · Local Action Group · Information broker · Internet homepage · Hyperlinks · Institutional network analysis

1 Introduction

The development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is associated in the economics literature with the transformation to the post-industrial New Economy, and in social sciences with the creation of new relationships and features of the Information Society (Kasperkiewicz, 2004; OECD, 2001). Wired and wireless telecommunications technologies today allow access to the Internet in most built-up areas in Europe (Eurostat, 2022). Digital technologies stimulate the development of links between urban development centres and less-developed peripheral regions, including remote rural areas (Grimes, 2003). Thanks to ICT, the transformation of rural areas from monofunctional areas of primary agricultural production to post-productivist multifunctional areas is facilitated, where various types of services also become more important (Almstedt et al., 2014; Varelidis, 2003). One of the elements of ICT, which affects the development of rural areas by reducing the asymmetry in access to information, is the World Wide Web (WWW). The WWW provides numerous information and geoinformation services as well as modern tools supporting the management of local resources, helping to increase the efficiency of local resource management (Hewitt et al., 2020; Janc et al., 2019; Kazak & Szewrański, 2014; OECD, 2001).

At the local level, local governments are important brokers of information and often run extensive websites containing content on the issues of territorial public resources relevant to residents, potential investors and tourists (Grodach, 2009; Svobodová & Dittrichová, 2017). Such sites focus on the issues of local resource management and the promotion of towns and rural communes (Serrano-Cinca & Muñoz-Soro, 2019). However, they can also help in the dissemination of information on supra-local development goals (e.g. national or supra-national of the European Union) and on the means to achieve them.

Since the 1990s in the European Union (EU), cross-sectoral territorial partnerships, called Local Action Groups (LAGs), have been developed to provide additional support to socio-economic development and the activity of residents in functional rural and fishing regions, and since 2014 also in cities and city districts (Furmankiewicz et al., 2015; Moseley, 2003; Panciszko, 2020; Servillo & De Bruijn, 2018). LAGs prepare territorial development strategies with the participation of local institutional actors and residents and then receive EU funds for their implementation under the so-called Community Led Local Development (CLLD) approach (Lacquement et al., 2020; Rodríguez et al., 2019; Servillo & De Bruijn, 2018). These organizations run websites where they inform about their activities, including local grant competitions offering support for local activities and investments of farmers, small entrepreneurs, social organizations and public entities (Cejudo-García et al., 2022; Ruskai et al., 2021). They can act as additional brokers of information for local communities in the field of external activities and programmes supporting local social and economic development (Galindo-Pérez-de-Azpillaga & Foronda-Robles, 2018, Foronda-Robles & Galindo-Pérez-de-Azpillaga, 2021).

So far, research on LAGs has focused primarily on the issues of social and power relations in local governance, local cross-sectoral cooperation, grassroots activity of residents, and implemented local projects (Biczkowski, 2020; Cañete et al., 2020; Konečný et al., 2020; Navarro et al., 2016). Analyses of personal and institutional networks of relations usually focused on territorial links within LAGs (Lacquement, 2013; Papadopoulou et al., 2011), while analyses of LAGs' external links with other organizations were much less frequent in the literature (Marquardt et al., 2012). Similarly, studies on the use of ICT by LAGs were rare. One of the few examples is the work of Galindo-Pérez-de-Azpillaga and Foronda-Robles (2018) which evaluated digital access to the information provided by the 251 LAGs in Spain.

In this chapter, we develop the issue of using LAG websites as a digital source of information about external institutions dealing with the issues of socio-economic development and local resource management. We use webometrics, a recently emerged field dedicated to the quantitative study of the structure and patterns of internet links and resources, to analyze hyperlinks placed on the home pages of the surveyed organizations. These methods have previously been used in research on links between research centres (Park, 2010), institutions such as enterprises and municipalities (Holmberg & Thelwall, 2009; Janc, 2015; Svobodová & Dittrichová, 2017), in the research of sources of information for agriculture (Janc, 2013). We emphasize that analyses of links between websites, taking into account the geographical location of the institutions managing them, were relatively rarely undertaken in relation to other areas of research. However, as Maggioni and Uberti (2009) point out, linking pages with hyperlinks is often conditioned by spatial factors, which is particularly true of websites of territorial institutions such as cities, municipalities, regional authorities or territorial partnerships (including LAGs).

The subject of our analysis is LAG websites in Poland. The main objective of the research was to determine which external organizations (which are not LAG members and usually located outside the LAG's territory), related to the policy of socio-economic development and local resource management, are important for

LAGs from the point of view of the information they provide. In this way, we also tried to assess whether LAGs, through their websites, are intermediaries in access to information on supra-local policies and development goals (including European Union policies), as well as on funds and organizations supporting local development and activity of residents, other than EU funds. We analyzed both which external institutions (organizations) the links lead to, as well as the geographical location of the seat of the institution that manages the website. Due to the fact that most Polish LAGs operate in rural areas, excluding cities inhabited by over 20,000 people (Ministerstwo Infrastruktury i Rozwoju 2014), and only seven LAGs operate in city districts (Panciszko, 2020), our considerations are discussed against the background of rural development issues.

2 The Internet as a Source of Information for Local Communities

Just as in the nineteenth century, the industrial revolution led to significant socio-economic changes, so today there is a transformation towards the New (or Networked) Economy and Information Society, in which social development and socio-economic relations are heavily influenced, even driven by, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) (OECD, 2001; Varelidis, 2003). This also applies to changes in rural areas, which are no longer monofunctional areas dedicated to agricultural production, but are transitioning to multifunctional modes of development (Almstedt et al., 2014; Slee, 2005). In this sense, ICT, which is conducive to the removal of geographical constraints typical of peripheral areas, including remote rural areas, is expected to play an important role (Marshall, 2001). The development of telecommunications and information technologies facilitates access to many knowledge and information-based services, regardless of geographical location (Grimes, 2003).

There are two main driving forces of the New Economy related to ICT development, increasing computational capabilities on one hand and increasing networking on the other. The first of these relates to the adoption of more powerful hardware and software, which together offer increasing efficiency, e.g. in controlling devices and modelling physical and socio-economic events, etc. (Balayev & Mirzayev, 2022; Hewitt et al., 2020). The second feature relates to the fundamental role of the Internet, which facilitates the creation of network social relations, the diffusion of information, and also allows remote use of particular services. At the same time, however, there is a risk of digital exclusion of some social groups and territories. Peripherality tends to be associated with cultural conservatism and resistance to innovations, limited access to information and lower abilities and knowledge to use ICT effectively. Hence, the creation of an Information Society, effectively using the advantages of ICT, regardless of the geographical (physical) location of citizens, is an important aim of EU policy (Kasperkiewicz, 2004; Shahin & Finger, 2009).

The creation of the World Wide Web (WWW) enabled a rapid increase in information and data resources available for exploration in the digital domain. The WWW itself can be defined in the simplest way as a set of digital documents stored on computer devices, interconnected by hyperlinks. Therefore, hyperlinks should be identified with connections between websites (WWW nodes) and within them (between pages). They enable the selection of related content or services located in different digital locations (websites). Hyperlinks, as a binding element, enable the functioning of the WWW, but their function goes beyond the purely technical aspect. They play an important role in navigating, directing the reader's attention from one place in the digital space to another (Halavais, 2008). Since hyperlinks are created by website developers for a specific purpose, it can often be assumed that they will show real preferences or relationships between people and institutions that are represented by individual websites.

ICT develops best in large cities (development centres), partly because these places offer a favourable ratio of infrastructure development costs (physical proximity of households and business premises) to the number of potential customers (high share of educated people with relatively high incomes, many company headquarters) (Brzezińska, 2018; Svobodová & Dittrichová, 2017). However, these technologies are also of great importance for the development of rural and peripheral areas, by facilitating access to information and some services (in remote form), the use of which was previously possible only by physically moving to an urban centre. In Poland, in 2021, 92.4% of households had access to the Internet (Gumiński et al., 2021), similar to the average for the entire EU (Eurostat, 2022). In rural areas of Poland, this share was 91.8% (increased from 78.6% in 2017). While this is a high proportion, this figure hides the generally poor availability of high-quality telecommunications infrastructure, e.g. lower Internet speeds in sparsely populated rural areas (Grimes, 2003; Janc et al., 2022). The social characteristics of rural residents also have a negative impact, as rural dwellers are usually less sensitive to technical and cultural innovations than city dwellers (Feuer et al., 2020; Łoboda, 1988; Melnyk et al., 2021; Philip & Williams, 2019). This is due, among other things, to a smaller number of social interactions (than in densely populated cities), as well as to the average lower level of education and average lower income of inhabitants of rural areas compared to urban areas.

The role of the Internet as a source of information for rural communities in Poland is becoming more and more important. According to Eurostat, when Poland joined the EU, only 29% of the population had used the Internet in the last three months (Eurostat, 2022). This share gradually increased, reaching 85% in 2021. In both cases, these values were lower than the EU-27 average (44.6% in 2004 and 89% in 2021). The highest value of the indicator—around 99%—was achieved in 2021 by countries such as Iceland, Norway, Ireland and Denmark, while the lowest was achieved by Bulgaria (75%). However, the social structure of the users is also important. According to surveys carried out by the governmental CBOS Foundation in Poland, people with primary education, unskilled workers and farmers used this medium the least. In rural areas, only 68% of residents used the Internet minimum once a week, while in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants, this figure rose to

84% (Feliksiak, 2021). The main source of information for Polish residents about events in the country and in the world was television—in 2017 for 64% of people, while in 2021 for 52% of people (a notable decrease). At the same time, the role of the Internet increased from 21% in 2017 to 37% in 2021. However, in rural areas in 2021, only 33% of people used the Internet as the main source of information (Omyła-Rudzka & Roguska, 2021). This indicates that websites still have limited opportunities to provide information to residents of rural areas due to the relatively low proportion of Internet users among the rural population. This applies in particular to the elderly and retired people, who constitute a high percentage of the population in some rural areas, and farmers. In 2021, only 57.6% of retirees and economically inactive people used the Internet in Poland, and 75% of farmers (Gumiński et al., 2021). The share of Polish residents who obtained information from public authorities' websites (last 12 months) in 2021 was 29% and was below the EU-27 average (47%). For comparison, this rate was 91% in Denmark and only 11% in Romania (Eurostat, 2022). However, a clear upward trend in the value of this indicator showed that public websites are increasingly used. In Poland, digital services and technologies are less well-developed than the EU average (Melnik et al., 2021).

At the same time, the strong dominance of social media and excessive control of media content by the political governing authorities represent a threat to the provision of reliable information through Internet sources. In the first case, there is the problem of dissemination of false information, based on superstition or related to deliberate disinformation or marketing (Allcott et al., 2019). In the second case, political authorities often try to control the content of the media, deliberately filling it with information or propaganda that is beneficial for gaining support, something which has been visible in recent years in Poland (Żuk, 2020). LAG portals, independent of political authorities (including public media companies dependent on central political authorities), managed by educated people, could be an additional source of rational information on problems and opportunities for rural development, including supra-local and pan-European development goals.

3 Materials and Methods

The analysis of hyperlinks on websites presented in this chapter is the domain of webometrics, which concerns “the study of the quantitative aspects of the construction and use of information resources, structures and technologies on the Web drawing on bibliometric and informetric approaches” (Ingwersen & Björneborn, 2005). As noted by Dorogovtsev and Mendes (2002), the World Wide Web is a matrix of websites with hyperlinks constituting mutual relations between the sites. Since links are usually consciously introduced by website managers, by analyzing the links between them, real social and economic relations, as well as the dissemination of ideas and information can be identified (Thelwall, 2009). Hyperlink analysis is

the primary source of understanding the World Wide Web and the real-world relationships it expresses (Ooghe-Tabanou et al., 2018), including links between actors operating in the digital space (Rogers, 2018).

All LAGs in Poland have their own websites, which they are obliged to maintain under the support programme rules for the purposes of implementing the Local Development Strategy (Prezydent Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2015). Current links to LAG websites were obtained by searching for their name using the Google Search Engine, based on the LAG contact list obtained from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development in Warsaw.

This study of LAG websites was carried out manually, which is an acceptable method used in webometrics when analyzing a small number of websites (Holmberg & Thelwall, 2009). We deliberately did not use hyperlink search software externally on websites, as we wanted to include only user-readable links, clearly marked with a logo or with a clear message that it is a recommended external link. In this case, the researcher used their own subjective judgement to assess whether the user would be able to view and follow these links satisfactorily. In addition, the researcher had to verify whether the link leads to an external non-member institution (which was the subject of the analysis) or to a member organization located in the territory of the LAG (which was not taken into consideration).

Our results were obtained in two ways: (1) through analysis of the network of institutional connections in the digital space; (2) through analysis of the network of connections in geographical space (based on the location of the organization's headquarters and their regional branches). In the first type of analysis, we focused primarily on the institution (organization) that manages or is the owner of the website to which the links led (institutional analysis). If, on the one hand, the LAG had several links to portals (or various sub-pages) of a given institution or its branches, only one connection was counted in the analysis (one LAG relationship with an external organization via many links). This means that the presented data do not show the total number of hyperlinks, but the number of LAG websites that placed one or more hyperlinks on their website to websites run or supervised by the analyzed external institution (including its branches, if it had any). For example, the governmental Agency for Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture (ARMA) has its headquarters in Warsaw and its subordinate regional branches. In the analysis of institutional links, they were counted jointly as a link with one organization (without distinguishing a branch). Similarly, the Agricultural Advisory Centre (AAC) based in Brwinów (a state organizational unit reporting directly to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development) was not distinguished from its 16 voivodeship branches and these were generally treated as AAC. Similarly, Marshal's Offices (self-governing authorities of regions called voivodeships in Poland) often own various websites—the main homepage, a website promoting a given region, a website dedicated exclusively to handling regional EU funds, and others. In this case, the analysis included one connection, shown on the graphs as a single line to the given Marshal's Office. Links to individual ministries of the central government in Warsaw were analyzed separately. We also counted links to archival pages of ministries that had been liquidated or transformed.

In the second part of the research, we carried out a spatial analysis of the headquarters of institutions managing websites. In this case, the regional headquarters of organizations and central institutions (e.g. the headquarters of provincial branches of ARMA and AAC) were considered separately.

The research deliberately omitted hyperlinks that:

- were provided temporarily in “news”, i.e. in current messages shown chronologically, which are not always archived. Such information can be changed on an ongoing basis and cannot be compared methodically, which is why we analyzed only relatively permanent links, which were proposed as the most important;
- were indicated in publications and text documents available for download (usually publications and brochures in the form of Adobe pdf files);
- led to the websites of IT companies that support the website in technical terms or a hosting company providing a domain or server;
- led unintentionally to companies that have purchased domains previously owned by other organizations. An example is the website <https://www.leaderplus.org.pl/> which was originally (according to information on the LAG websites) to lead to the website of the National LEADER + Network and was purchased by a commercial company that keeps a company directory, taking advantage of the earlier popularity of this portal;
- led to the pages of official journals of Polish legal acts (isap.sejm.gov.pl; dziennikustaw.gov.pl) and the EU (eur-lex.europa.eu), as they usually led to a specific document opening in the form of a file;
- were located deeper than the third level requiring opening the entire subpage (i.e. when you need to open more than three consecutive nested sub-pages to reach the link);
- led to articles about a given LAG in other national or regional media (often under the name “media about us”; “they talk about us”, etc.), unless it was a general link promoting a given medium, and not a link to a specific text about LAG;

Many LAGs had links to their “archival website” which were not analyzed. Preliminary data were collected at the end of 2020 with the participation of students of Spatial Management at the Wrocław University of Environmental and Life Sciences. They were subsequently verified in detail and organized for analysis by the authors in the period January–February 2021 (so they represent the state at the beginning of 2021). Finally, after corrections for this analysis, researchers considered 1283 links leading to websites maintained by 313 institutions (including LAGs).

4 Results

4.1 Network Analysis of Connections in the Digital Space

As a result of research on the official websites of LAGs in Poland, we found the existence of the types of hyperlinks that we analyzed on 272 websites (in 84% of LAGs). The average number of external institutions connected to by stable hyperlinks was 4 per LAG page. Hyperlinks to the largest number of external organizations were directed from the website LAG “Zielone Mosty Narwii”—35, then LAG “Szansa Bezdroży Gmin Powiatu Goleniowskiego”—32. The next 19 websites suggested viewing websites from 10 to 35 external institutions, while all other websites—below 10 (Fig. 1).

The external websites included in the analysis, proposed by LAGs, were maintained by 313 institutions (including other LAGs) both from Poland and from other countries. Table 1 lists the 20 institutions whose websites were most often suggested by LAG websites, while Fig. 2 shows a graph of outgoing connections from LAG websites to websites of other organizations. The clear leaders are two central institutions: the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (Warsaw) and the Agency for Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture (Warsaw), whose sites recommended 179 and 174 LAGs, respectively. These institutions are directly involved in creating procedures and accounting for EU funds, including funds available under the CLLD framework. For this reason, most pages proposed by LAGs concerned the implementation of the Rural Development Programme (in the case of typical rural

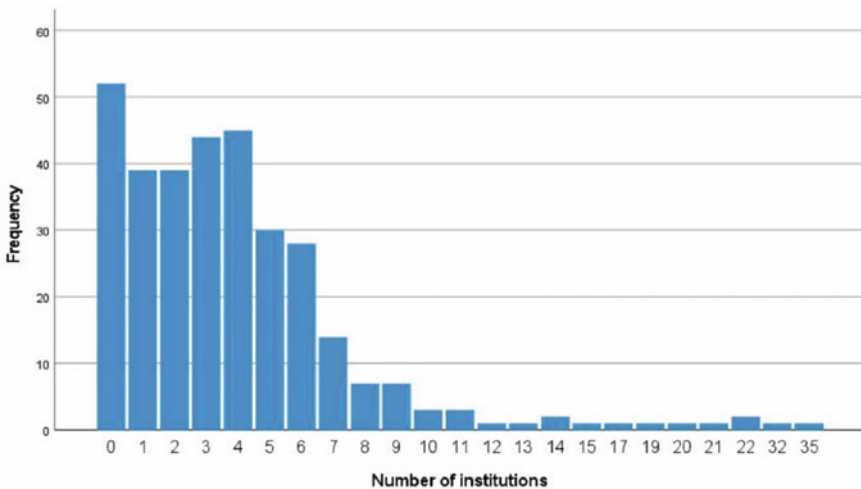


Fig. 1 Histogram of the number of institutions supervising Internet portals to which hyperlinks were directed from the homepages of 324 LAGs. *Source* authors’ own work

LAGs), followed by the Operational Programme for Fisheries and Sea (in the case of fisheries LAGs).

The National Rural Network (NRN, links from 102 LAGs) was also of relatively substantial importance for LAGs. This network has existed since 2009. Currently, it consists mainly of public government institutions: the managing authority (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development), the Agricultural Advisory Centre in Brwinów and its 16 regional units, the Agency for Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture and the National Centre for Agricultural Support. According to EU recommendations, such networks must operate in every Member State. The national networks belong to the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD). The NRN carries out projects supporting the development of rural areas. As part of the Network's projects, conferences, fairs and study trips are organized, training sessions, seminars and workshop meetings are conducted, scientific research and expert opinions are carried out, publications and films are published. In addition, the NRN collects and disseminates information on the development of rural areas and modern agriculture. Information on these activities can be found on the NRN website.

It should be emphasized that some of the links led to archive pages of non-existent organizations and ministries (e.g. the Ministry of Maritime Economy and Inland Navigation, liquidated in 2020). This is the result of the instability of the organizational structures of the central political authorities and poor knowledge of these changes at the local level.

The websites run or supervised by regional authorities (Marshal's Offices) were of relatively high importance and were hyperlinked from many LAG websites. Websites recommended by LAGs most often concerned EU funds available under the CLLD approach, and less often they were general websites of Marshal's Offices or websites promoting a given region.

Among the external websites of institutions recommended by LAGs, there are also websites of large non-governmental organizations supporting local development, such as: the Klon/Jawor Association (links from 19 LAGs), the Forum for the Animation of Rural Areas (16), the Polish-American Freedom Foundation (13) and its associated Academy for the Development of Philanthropy in Poland (15). The Klon/Jawor Association is a non-political non-profit association whose main goal is the development of a tolerant, active, creative, self-organizing society. It runs the largest portal of non-governmental organizations in Poland and publishes reports on the condition of civil society in Poland. The Forum for the Animation of Rural Areas is a nationwide agreement of organizations working for the development of rural areas within the EU by activating rural communities and increasing their participation in the process of transformation in the countryside, as well as promoting sustainable development of rural areas. The Academy of Philanthropy in Poland focuses, among other things, on supporting local (usually covering several communes) small grant funds for local communities, co-financed by the Polish-American Freedom Foundation. They apply much simpler procedures than for grants co-financed from EU funds, which facilitate the preparation of projects by groups of residents. A dozen or

Table 1 Institutions (including their regional branches) whose services were most often proposed via hyperlinks by the surveyed LAGs

No.	Acronym and name of the institution	Number of LAG websites with hyperlink to the institution*
1	MARD—Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Warsaw	179
2	ARMA—Agency for Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture, Warsaw (government organization)	174
3	NRN—National Rural Network, Warsaw (government organization)	102
4	EU—European Union (or European Commission), Brussels	32
5	MFRP—Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy, Warsaw	26
6	Mazowieckie—Marshal's Office of the Mazowieckie Region, Warsaw (regional self-government)	26
7	AAC—Agricultural Advisory Centres (government organization)	24
8	Małopolskie—Marshal's Office of the Małopolskie Region, Kraków (regional self-government)	21
9	FAPA—FAPA Foundation Polish Chamber of Cooperative Banking, Warsaw (government organization)	19
10	KJA—Klon/Jawor Association, Warsaw (non-governmental organization)	19
11	Podkarpackie—Marshal's Office of the Podkarpackie Region, Rzeszów (regional self-government)	19
12	MMEIN—Ministry of Maritime Economy and Inland Navigation, Warsaw	18
13	Wielkopolskie—Marshal's Office of the Wielkopolskie Region, Poznań (regional self-government)	17
14	FARA—Forum for the Animation of Rural Areas, Warsaw (non-governmental organization)	16
14	ADP—Academy for the Development of Philanthropy in Poland, Warsaw (non-governmental organization)	15
16	Lubelskie—Marshal's Office of the Lubelskie Region, Lublin (regional self-government)	15
17	PAFF—Polish-American Freedom Foundation, Warsaw (non-governmental organization)	13
18	Pomorskie—Marshal's Office of the Pomorskie Region, Gdańsk (regional self-government)	12

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

No.	Acronym and name of the institution	Number of LAG websites with hyperlink to the institution*
19	Świętokrzyskie—Marshal’s Office of the Świętokrzyskie Region, Kielce (regional self-government)	12
20	Warmińsko-Mazurskie—Marshal’s Office of the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Region, Olsztyn (regional self-government)	12

*Number of LAG websites offering minimum one hyperlink to institutional websites. *Source* authors’ own work

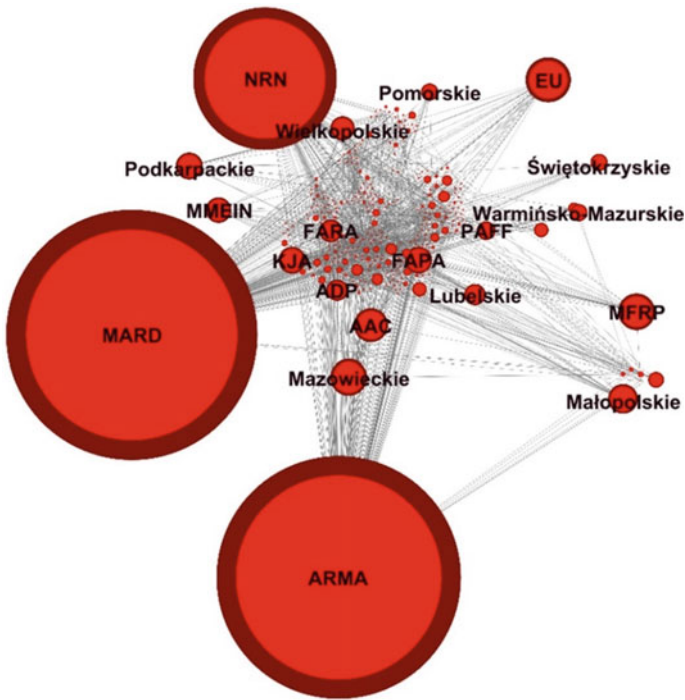


Fig. 2 Graph of the network of links between LAG websites and websites of other organizations that are not members of a given LAG (node size proportional to the number of incoming links). The acronyms of the organizations whose websites were most frequently suggested for viewing are explained in Table 1. *Source* authors’ own work

so LAGs in Poland are involved in promoting this type of additional grant competitions in their territory (regardless of EU funds); hence, they have placed links to these two organizations on their websites.

LAGs very rarely offer visitors to their websites information about the EU, its policy and development goals. Only 32 LAGs' (almost 10%) websites have linked to websites endorsed by EU institutions, even though many of these EU-endorsed websites also offered basic information in Polish. Only one LAG website linked to the European Network for Rural Development and three to the FARNET Fisheries Areas Network. These are two important European organizations dealing also with CLLD issues and supporting LAGs.

4.2 Network Analysis of Connections in Geographical Space

Another important feature of the analyzed websites is the geographical location of the seat of the institution (or its regional branch) that runs the website (Figs. 3 and 4). In the case of Polish LAGs, hyperlinks on websites led to organizations whose seats were located in a total of 83 towns (including 11 abroad). The largest number of links led to institutions located in Warsaw (Warszawa), as most state central institutions and large nationwide organizations are based in the capital of the country. The capitals of regions in which Marshal's Offices (directly supervising LAGs) and regional branches of government agencies and institutions are located are also of great importance.

Only 47 LAGs (15%) posted links to institutions outside Poland on their websites. These were usually information portals of the EU, whose departments are mainly located in Brussels (Fig. 5). In addition, only seven Polish LAGs placed links to LAGs located in other countries, including four in Italy, two in France and one in Lithuania. This was usually related to the implementation of cooperation projects involving study visits. In addition, one link led to the International Visegrad Fund based in Bratislava, Slovakia. This organization supports regional cooperation between civil society organizations in Central Europe.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

In this work, we analyzed hyperlinks leading to websites maintained by external institutions, not belonging to the LAG, operating in support of local social and economic development. LAGs' websites most often linked to information portals of central authorities—ministries, agencies and government foundations, which usually prepare the rules for the implementation and financing of various types of public support programmes or supervise their implementation. A similar relationship was found in the case of municipal Internet pages in the Czech Republic (Svobodová & Dittrichová, 2017).

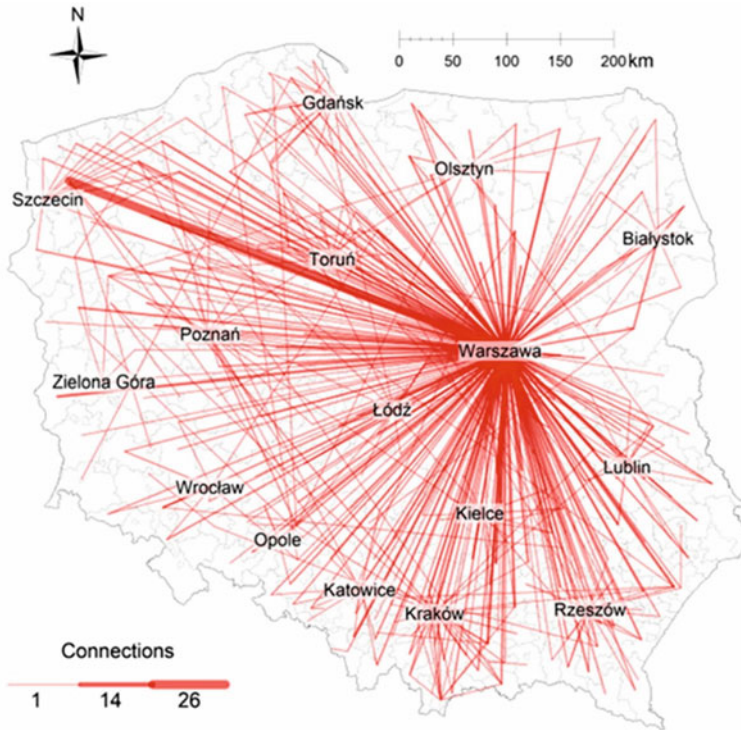


Fig. 3 Geographical visualization of the analyzed links between LAGs and external organizations based on hyperlink analysis. *Source* authors' own work

The activities of LAGs emphasize their bottom-up character, based on the ideas and needs of local communities (Cejudo-García et al., 2022; Chmielinski et al., 2018). Meanwhile, it should be remembered that according to many authors, LAGs should be a conscious element of neo-endogenous development, in which at least partial compliance of local and supra-local development goals is sought (Bosworth et al., 2016; Furmankiewicz et al., 2021b). The LAG websites analyzed suggest, however, that such local organizations focus almost exclusively on informing about the procedures related to spending EU funds under the CLLD approach and to much lesser extent informing about pan-European development goals and policies. Only a few LAGs offer users' access to EU information portals on their websites, although they are usually financed almost exclusively from EU funds. Information on EU policies is most often "filtered" by actors associated with national central authorities and therefore may not reach local communities at all. The relatively low interest in EU objectives at the local level is confirmed by the example of the analysis of LAGs' local development strategies in two regions of Poland, which found that only half of the documents mention the existence of the Europe 2020 strategy, which formulates supra-national EU development goals (Furmankiewicz et al., 2021b).

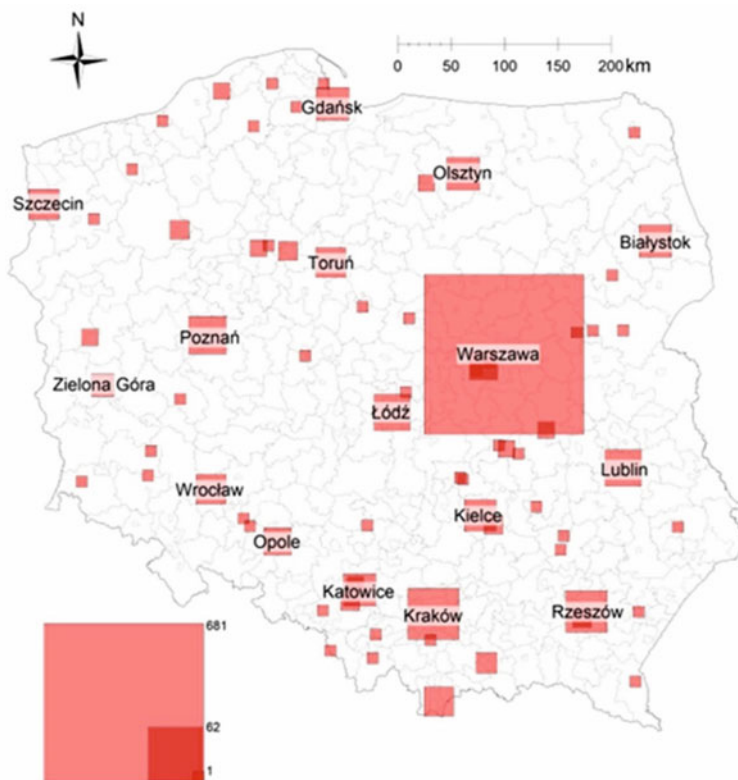


Fig. 4 Number of analyzed incoming calls from LAG websites to websites of entities located in a given town in Poland (other than LAGs). *Source* authors' own work

Poor information on EU-wide goals and institutions is not conducive to European integration. Indeed, the outcome of the Brexit referendum in 2016, resulting in the UK's exit from the EU, was strongly influenced by UK citizens' very low level of knowledge about the EU, its goals and institutions (Puchalska, 2019).

In Poland (which is a unitary state), for many years, the most influential organizations in the field of rural development policy have been central government ministries, agencies and foundations involved in the formulation and implementation of national agricultural and rural development policy, often having extensive branches also at the regional level. In the literature, this system was perceived as weakening bottom-up activities and promoting a tendency to wait passively for directives and central funds (Osa et al., 2006). Osa et al. in (2006) indicated that accession to the EU initially even strengthened the role of central authorities, whose agencies became the main distributors of European funds. The analysis of LAG websites confirms the key role of central government institutions as a source of information on rural development opportunities, supporting the findings of previous research which noted the importance of central government institutions as a source of knowledge for farmers (Janc,

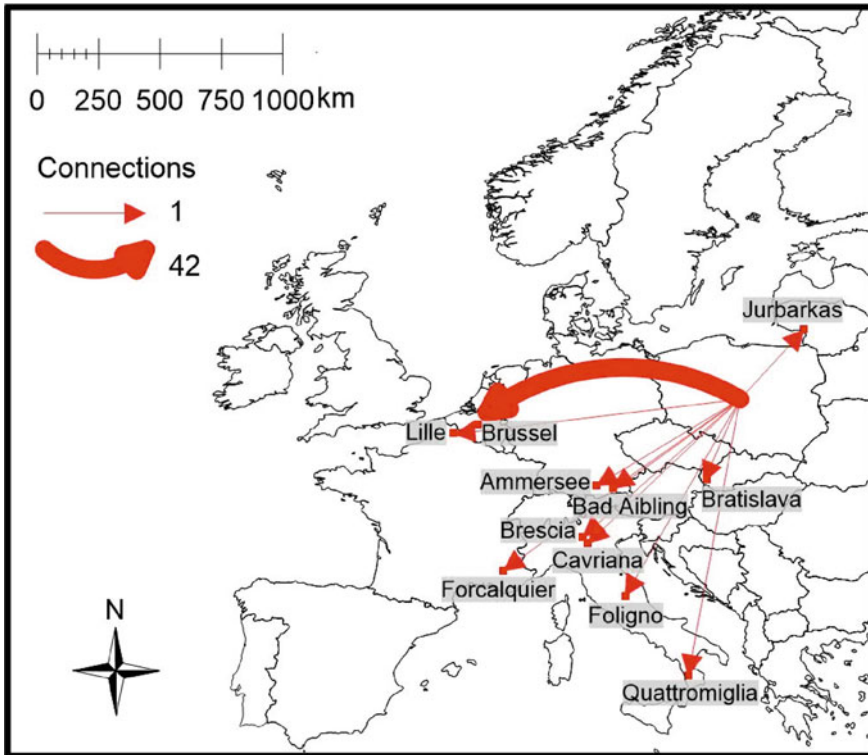


Fig. 5 Geographic visualization of hyperlinks leading from Polish LAGs to organizations located outside Poland. Source authors' own work

2013). However, in comparison to these earlier analyses conducted a decade ago (Janc, 2013; Osa et al., 2006), the present study suggests an increase in the importance of regional self-governing authorities for local stakeholders. This is probably due to the gradual strengthening of the role of regional self-governing authorities, which were established in Poland only on 1 January 1999, in managing regional development.

Non-governmental organizations independent of the central political authorities are of lesser importance for LAGs, although several large organizations working for the activation of local communities (including rural ones) are noted by (i.e. hyperlinked from) LAG associations, e.g. the Klon/Jawor Association from Warsaw. LAGs also provide little information on other (non-EU) opportunities to raise funds for local activities, with the most well-known among Polish LAGs being the programme of the Academy for the Development of Philanthropy and the Polish-American Freedom Foundation “Act Locally”, under which competitions for small grants are organized. Relatively weak links between LAGs (strongly associated with member municipalities) and other non-governmental organizations are probably the result of the lack of tradition of establishing institutionalized networks of cooperation between local

state and society in post-socialist Poland (Gašior-Niemiec, 2010; Gendźwiłł et al., 2020).

LAG websites could also inform to a greater extent not only about the successes of local projects, but also show innovative projects that have been successful in other LAGs in the country and abroad. Meanwhile, only six LAGs posted links to friendly LAGs from other European countries. Despite the problem of the language barrier, placing information about the so-called good practices in other LAGs (including those abroad) could become an inspiration for local communities, especially in the field of activities that, bringing benefits to local communities, would also be in line with the implementation of supra-local development goals.

LAGs could, at low cost, become an additional intermediary of information on the goals and possibilities of socio-economic development on a supra-local scale, but as the analysis of the external services they propose shows, they are usually not interested in such issues. While maintaining support for bottom-up activities, it is worth paying more attention in EU programmes to informing the public about national and supra-national development goals. Permanent information and links on LAG websites could be a way to promote such important goals as counteracting dangerous climate change, energy transformation, ameliorating social exclusion, or increasing the share of professionally active people. Objectives of this type are often mentioned in EU strategies, but they are often disregarded in Poland, both in national and local strategies and documents (Furmankiewicz et al., 2021a). Of course, we are aware that offering links on LAG websites is only a passive way of promoting external institutions and their objectives. Due to the poor use of Internet portals as a source of information in rural areas, the actual use of links proposed by LAGs (local residents becoming familiar with them) may be negligible. Currently, however, even this method of passive transfer of information is poorly used by LAGs and is mainly limited to recommending information from government institutions involved in the implementation of the CLLD approach.

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The Role of Local Factors in the Spatial Concentrations for Rural Development. An Application in the Apulia Region (Italy)



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Abstract In the most recent LEADER programming periods, there has been an important shift in rural development policy, from a purely sectorial, productivist approach to a more integrated, territorial one. In fact, rural development within the framework of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has become particularly important and effective throughout Europe, by taking on the huge but vital task of rediscovering the potential and capabilities of rural territories. Within the framework of the Common Agricultural Policy, rural development has played an increasingly significant role throughout Europe, by introducing methodological innovations, especially in governance and practices. In this way, it has rediscovered the potential and the capacity of rural areas, addressing problems that are common to many European regions such as depopulation, inadequate infrastructure and basic services and a lack of human and social capital crucial to stimulate innovation. From this perspective, it is important to identify particular local features and resources that can offer advantages for local development. However, major innovations in terms of policy, governance and skills are also required. Evidence from experiences across Europe indicates that the Common Agricultural Policy, through the LEADER approach, supports these goals and is trying to reduce regional inequalities. It seeks to solve contextual problems and acts as a laboratory for building local capacities and experimenting with new ways of meeting the needs of local communities under the neo-endogenous development approach. From this point of view, and assuming the role of agriculture over time, the territorial context plays a central, strategic role in rural development. Therefore, it is fundamental to understand the context in which these experiences take place and the point of view adopted to describe it. This chapter, based on the neo-endogenous approach, the reflections emerging from literary review and recent programming documents, aims to analyze the priority strategic objectives for sustainable development, the main territorial factors underlying it and potential

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successful experiences on a local scale in the Italian region of Apulia, an interesting case study for Italy due to the socioeconomic importance of agriculture in the region and the processes of transformations within the context of LEADER in recent years. Combining data and cartographic analysis, we will describe the main regional characteristics going on to identify by a preliminary analysis the structural problems and potential drivers of innovation, important factors that are concentrated in specific areas. This study will enable us to identify dynamics, emerging problems, policy recommendations and indications for regional development and the future of the CAP, focusing in particular on marginal rural areas.

Keywords Spatial concentrations · Regional analysis · Rural development · Apulia

1 Introduction

In the most recent LEADER programming periods, there has been an important shift in rural development policy, away from a purely sectorial, productivist approach to a more integrated, territorial one (Cejudo & Labianca, 2017; Dax & Oedl-Wieser, 2016; Gkartzios & Scott, 2014; Labianca, 2016, 2021; Ray, 2001). A new concept of rurality, new forms of organization of rural areas, accompanied by more recent socioeconomic transformations of suburban areas, have gradually emerged from the transition of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) from a sector-based model to a territorial one (Riggio & Varraso, 2016). In fact, rural development within the framework of the CAP has become particularly important and effective throughout rural Europe, by taking on the huge but vital task of rediscovering the potential and capabilities of territories.

In the programming of the Common Agricultural Policy from 2023 onwards, agriculture and rural areas will be at the heart of the set of policy initiatives known as the European Green Deal. Over the next few years, the CAP will therefore be a key tool for achieving specific objectives set out in the strategies applied in European countries in an integrated way, and in particular, it will act in synergy with the Farm-to-Fork and Biodiversity programmes. The “new” CAP (European Commission, 2019c) aims to provide highly results-oriented tools to support the agricultural sector and to renew and energize rural areas with a view to pursuing social, environmental and economic sustainability objectives, supporting the transition towards sustainable agriculture and forestry in the EU.

In this context, the rural development objectives for the next programming period seek to promote smart, resilient and diversified agriculture, which is capable of guaranteeing food security. This “new” agriculture must also play an active role in the launch and consolidation of actions in defence of the environment and in the fight against climate change and provide active support for fragile marginal territories. The modernization of agriculture and the dissemination and support of knowledge and

innovation are key objectives for marginal territories and require strategic, transversal and systemic action (European Commission, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c).

Therefore, the Common Agricultural Policy 2023–27 represents an important challenge for European countries on several levels, firstly because it aspires to tackle the negative socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which seems to have hit the most fragile territories and population groups hardest, and secondly because it proposes an ambitious and openly more sustainable development model than was previously proposed for rural areas in line with the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2019b, 2019c). The new orientation of the CAP aims to implement complex, strategic interventions to help usher in a future of more equitable, more sustainable agriculture and forestry, especially in marginal areas. To this end, it takes into account the critical issues and the main problems that have emerged in recent years, especially on a local scale (Cejudo & Navarro, 2020; Labianca, 2017, 2021), providing greater support for small farms and trying to adopt a more place-based approach with greater recognition and enhancement of local potentialities. The future CAP will seek to define an “enabling framework” to support the transition of European countries towards resilient, sustainable and climate-friendly agriculture, systems and value chains and the achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (European Commission, 2019c, 2020, 2021). This involves decisive interventions in the areas with the most ingrained obstacles and territorial context problems. These areas are often characterized by a complex range of structural obstacles such as the ageing of the population, the rural exodus, the small size and low profitability of companies, low propensity for innovation and valorization of local human and social capital, which stand in the way of the successful development of quality products and the exploitation of underestimated local potential.

The transition towards more sustainable agricultural systems and rural communities can be implemented through a new strategic and systemic CAP that acts through various coordinated and integrated tools. These range from support for research, as in the Horizon Europe programme, to more specific interventions to improve the competitiveness and sustainability of agriculture and forestry, through, for example, the European Agriculture Innovation Partnership (EIP-AGRI), or Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS), which promote knowledge services and digitalization (European Commission, 2019a).

In this particular context, it is important to highlight the strategic role played by knowledge and innovation, defined in the literature as fundamental for triggering development processes, especially in marginal rural areas (Bock, 2016; Bosworth et al., 2016; Copus et al., 2008; Dax & Oedl-Wieser, 2016; ESPON, 2010, 2017, 2022; Labianca, 2021; Maccallum et al., 2009; Moulaert et al., 2005; Ray, 2006). Within the Farm-to-Fork Strategy, all of these objectives are sought through interventions that try to protect food and nutritional security, enhance environmental and biodiversity protection, mitigate the effects of climate change and strengthen socioeconomic processes in rural areas (Labianca, 2022).

Based on this approach, the future CAP will be integrated into the Green Deal and must be compatible with its objectives. It will adopt new ways of working, centred

on a national strategic plan based on local characteristics and needs, including innovative tools that will promote sustainable agricultural practices throughout the EU. According to proposals from the European Commission, a significant proportion of CAP activity will be directed towards the environment and the climate in a bid to help mitigate and adapt to climate change, promoting sustainable development and the efficient management of natural resources such as water, soil and air, in this way contributing to the protection of biodiversity, enhancing ecosystem services and preserving habitats and landscapes. In order to achieve these objectives, each Member State will draw up a specific National Plan on the basis of their particular context and this Plan will clearly indicate the potential, opportunities and needs of the different territories. With this information, it will program interventions and actions that conform to community guidelines and meet current local needs by taking advantage of the opportunities in rural areas. In line with this Plan, it is therefore considered more necessary than ever to adopt appropriate approaches, styles of governance and communication, and to encourage better representation and description of the regional contexts, which on the basis of European experiences, would imply, in many cases, important cultural, institutional and operational changes at a local scale (Labianca, 2021).

Only in recent years, has there been an attempt to provide these answers on a European level, through scientific debate and by privileged observatories such as ESPON, an EU-funded programme that supports the public authorities responsible for designing territorial policies with quality expertise. ESPON has developed thematic methodological studies aimed at identifying emerging geographical inequalities and imbalances, their socioeconomic characteristics and the potential for integrated development of these areas. These could provide solid, well-researched reference points and support for the definition of programmes and strategies in Europe. However, for some years now, the analysis of European contexts has identified important problems that can limit the potential of marginal rural areas. These include the poor provision of basic services and infrastructures, and contextual factors such as the lack of human and social capital, and the limited ability to innovate. Recent territorial evidence shows that with regard to innovation that there is a positive correlation between the involvement of regional public actors with innovators from other regions and enterprises in broader, especially social innovation. This can be interpreted as a favourable environment in which, with the support of public authorities, risk-averse enterprises can be guided towards new opportunities which reconcile economic and social interests. Partnerships with innovators from regions with greater potential for the flow of knowledge within society can have positive impacts on the innovation projects developed by companies. However, this potential arises from the relative position of the partner regions in the innovation network (ESPON, 2022). Within the context of the CAP, innovation has mainly been centred around technical advances and new technologies, a trend that can be observed in most LEADER regions across Europe (Cejudo & Labianca, 2017; Labianca, 2021; Labianca et al., 2016, 2020). Some of the greatest difficulties arise because most of the entrepreneurs in rural areas are small businesspeople or farmers, defined in the European Biodiversity strategy as the real custodians of rural landscapes, who

have great difficulties in connecting to strategic flows and networks of information and innovation. These farmers often have a wealth of traditional know-how, but they are limited by low profitability and a lack of the business acumen required for their agricultural enterprises to prosper. They also show a limited ability to enhance the value of local products, including niche products (Labianca, 2022). This requires targeted public interventions to remove the major obstacles that the most marginal European areas will be facing in the coming years.

In this sense, the provision of expert advice, knowledge and ideas for innovation in agriculture and rural areas will be fundamental in the coming years (European Commission, 2019c). This will require a collective territorial effort in which local actors come together and cooperate to develop new ideas and innovative solutions.

However, this assumes a “favourable environment” for innovation and for its dissemination and exploitation to achieve the objectives of the CAP. Among the tools launched in the 2014–2020 programming period, the European Commission has sought to stimulate innovation and the development of applied knowledge in different ways in order to encourage networking and an interactive innovation model that would accelerate innovation on the ground. This requires strong collaboration between the different actors so as to reduce the time it takes to put research findings into practice and produce tangible results, especially for small farms, in an attempt to avoid establishing objectives based purely on agricultural productivity and profitability.

Based on this general framework and within the context of European policies, in the following sections, with frequent references to the literature, we will be exploring the innovative capacity of the territories, by analyzing an emblematic case study in southern Italy, the Apulia region, which is recognized at an international and national level for its innovative approach in terms of governance and the policies that it has implemented to bring about rural development within the LEADER context. Furthermore, in this study we will try to explain the importance of studying and analyzing the dynamics of the regional context and the relationship with the approach/point of view adopted. In order to achieve this, the research will make use of literature review and the most relevant programming documents, an analysis of selected data at specific territorial scales (coming from official statistical sources) and cartographic correlation.

Main Challenges Facing the Marginal Rural Areas of Europe.

In this multi-levelled, complex context in which greater flexibility and subsidiarity are expected in the preparation and planning of interventions in the different European countries, network cooperation will be fundamental for guiding and defining strategic choices that meet specific, local needs. The CAP will continue to operate through its “second pillar” to provide a support system for rural development, promoting environmental and climate protection through grants in support of knowledge and innovation (training; innovative projects and investments, new forms of cooperation, such as, for example, encouraging the reuse of farm waste for the production of sustainable energy, etc.). In general, the strategic rural development plans under the CAP will therefore encourage the structuring and organization of a “national innovation ecosystem” which operates above all in favour of marginal areas. The

legislative framework of the CAP for the period 2021–2027 (European Commission, 2018) states as follows:

“In order to further enhance the sustainable development of agriculture, food and rural areas, the overall objectives of the CAP concern economic viability, resilience and farm incomes, improved environmental and climate performance and strengthening the socioeconomics of rural areas. The promotion of knowledge, innovation and digitalisation in the agricultural sector and in rural areas is also a cross-cutting objective [...]. A smarter, more modern and sustainable CAP must include research and innovation in order to fulfil the multifunctional role of the Union’s agriculture, forestry and food systems, investing in technological development and digitalisation, as well as improving access to unbiased, robust, relevant and new knowledge”.

Within this general framework, knowledge, innovation and digitalization are considered essential factors within the context of the new CAP and in general for the achievement of different political agendas in the EU (ESPON, 2022; European Commission, 2019c). In fact, in recent years, the role assigned to innovation, to the processes associated with it and to the contextual factors capable of stimulating, supporting and consolidating it, has become increasingly central to current international agendas. The communication issued by the European Commission on the future of food and agriculture (European Commission, 2017) forecasts that knowledge, innovation and digitalization would take on increasingly significant roles in the coming years, in this case by improving interventions within the CAP. Moreover, the innovations and technologies applied should, above all, support marginal areas and those most vulnerable to different events, especially exceptional climate events. They should also be used to develop any advantages they may have at an economic and social level. In this regard, knowledge, innovation and digitalization through technology associated with agriculture, for example, can generate important benefits for businesspeople, users and citizens.¹ However, there are obstacles, especially on a local scale in terms of the availability of sufficient, relevant knowledge and of human and social capital, especially in the most marginal areas (ESPON, 2017, 2020; Labianca, 2021). European policies and initiatives must therefore play a strategic role in the future development of marginal rural areas. These initial considerations highlight the need to take a dynamic, open perspective regarding innovation in the various aspects of territorial systems. On this basis, policy interventions can no longer be understood in the traditional way and instead must involve concerted action to reverse the processes of peripheralization and ageing, via a visionary multi-level approach. This question requires broader, more urgent reflections on the particular characteristics of marginal rural areas. As extensively discussed in some research report by ESPON (ESPON, 2017, 2022), within the context of cohesion policies, concerted policy action is urgently needed to halt the negative, downward spirals in these areas. Policies and strategies for marginal areas should therefore be particularly attentive to territorial needs, resources and actors. This is evident in the affirmation process of European policies, especially within the framework of the CAP in the most recent

¹ This is confirmed by the increasing dissemination of data, and the support for their creative and innovative application in strategic sectors such as agriculture, as in the case of the International Copernicus Observatory.

programming periods, which seek to remove the existing social and economic disparities between various regions. This paradigm shift has also been tackled thanks to the LEADER approach for the future of marginal rural areas in Europe and is evident in the transition to the enhancement of diversity and local resources and in maximizing community involvement in the various phases of local development projects. Indeed, since the 1990s, territorial practices, under the LEADER approach, have progressively introduced elements of innovation, which in themselves represent one of the main tools for the transformation of rural areas in European countries. In particular, innovation linked to technology in various fields and applications ranging from education to various sectors of the economy (industry, agriculture, tourism, services in general) is perhaps the most common and is considered essential for jump-starting regional development processes, especially in marginal rural areas.

Innovation in its broadest sense plays a key role in the agricultural and agri-food sector, so much so that it is viewed as an essential input for increasing productivity on present and future International Agendas (European Commission, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020, 2021). However, the skills needed to facilitate the transfer of knowledge within collective learning processes are specific in time and space and require a series of assets (often intangible) and localized skills that involve organizational aspects, rules and conventions, mechanisms and dynamics. This is why research efforts have focused on interpreting these “local codes” in order to help integrate them not only into companies but also into regional and local networks. At the same time, we should not forget that spatial proximity often facilitates these processes, hence the importance of innovative clusters, districts and regions, as emphasized in scientific debate. The existence of such clusters and the availability of local resources and capabilities can therefore be regarded as specific regional assets which support and reinforce the local. This is because assets of this kind are difficult to produce and reproduce because they take a long time to form, so highlighting strong development tendencies relating to the specific local path (Asheim & Gertler, 2006).

Another question concerns the specific motivations and conditions for innovation, which according to García-Cortijo et al. (2019) are very difficult to understand, especially in the context of agricultural entrepreneurs. When it comes to explaining why farmers decide to innovate, the literature about innovation in the agricultural sector has traditionally tended to focus on the particular characteristics of their farms, while other studies have tried to understand the relationships, especially at a national level, between innovation and mainly economic results. It is now known that various geographical factors can also lead to different innovative behaviours in different areas and can also affect the decision to innovate. As a result, innovative behaviour varies from region to region and is also influenced by a number of underlying factors such as access to education, research and consultancy services, services that are normally more difficult to access in marginal rural areas. Therefore, innovation can no longer be viewed from a linear perspective as an exogenous factor of external origin and instead should be defined as a complex phenomenon that varies according to the different contexts in which it takes place and the different territorial agents involved.

However, research studies that help us understand and explain the channels through which innovation is generated and implemented are not numerous, especially with regard to regional context factors. Unfortunately, this is especially true in peripheral regions, where innovation is considered essential to promote growth and restore territorial imbalances. Among the major obstacles, various researchers identify the lack of the basic conditions required for its activation (ESPON, 2017, 2020; Labianca & Navarro Valverde, 2019).

As argued by Asheim and Gertler (2006), in addition to geographical proximity, underlying relationships and similarities also play a fundamental role, because they enhance the effectiveness of knowledge-sharing between different economic actors, although it is still not clear which forces shape or define this “relational proximity” and enable it to transcend physical, cultural and institutional divisions.

As declared by the most important International Agendas, if we look specifically at agriculture, a traditional sector that remains crucial in most marginal rural areas, there is enormous diversity at European level (ESPON, 2010) and in particular in Italy, in terms of size, innovation characteristics, cultivation techniques, socio-economic, landscape features, etc. All of these require analyses which call into question various factors, methods and sources and which, through appropriate in-depth analyses, can enable us to comprehend the complexity of regional systems, the dynamics, the impacts of policy choices and interventions on territorial organization and the potential conflicts, for example, on land use and between planning instruments that affect the same territory. In general, peripheral regions rarely suffer from just one problem and instead are plagued by several problems at the same time. This can present real obstacles in the form of long distances, a lack or limited availability of specialized services and poor accessibility. In their study of firms and their innovative behaviour García-Cortijo et al. (2019) distinguished between internal and external factors. Internal factors include the firm’s investment capacity and its size (although the relationship between firm size and innovative efficiency is not always clearly defined). The age of the company is a further important factor, as studies often confirm negative relationships between the age of a company and its ability to innovate. Another important internal factor is represented by the overall human capital of a company that can nurture and develop innovation processes. Other factors include the type of company and the corporate structure, in that the presence of cooperatives tends to favour the growth and development not only of the associated companies, but also of the region as a whole. Moreover, cooperatives often help to develop social capital and social responsibility through collective action mechanisms. Finally, it is important to consider the different business sectors, in that the propensity for innovation and the type of innovation vary from sector to sector. For example, innovation is more frequent in the service sector than in agriculture. Among the factors external to the company, the size of the local economy and the local population are of great importance, as are research activities and levels of training. Another significant factor is location in that some farms can benefit from their proximity to specific innovation enablers such as universities and research centres.

However, according to Fløysand & Jakobsen (2011), it is necessary to think of innovation as “relational” and not traditional. This involves focusing on the networks

of actors, flows of knowledge and resources within these networks and the interconnection of various networks. In fact, innovation is a dynamic, open and interactive process that is based on learning and networking. However, this also requires acknowledging the presence of hegemonic positions of certain actors within these networks. The risk is that the development of strong links between research and politics may lead to an a priori recognition of the validity of this model, which therefore not only becomes the standard but is also used instrumentally to correct failures within innovation systems at different levels and territorial scales. Another criticism that is raised is that it is often assumed that a business environment and an advanced knowledge infrastructure must exist side-by-side, something which effectively excludes the majority of marginal contexts. A further aspect to take into consideration is that formal knowledge must be combined with contextual and informal knowledge (what/who/when/where and how). This requires an approach and an analytical framework that is capable of carrying out studies on innovation for the development of rural areas.

In a dynamic international context, intangible resources, including social, cultural and environmental capital, therefore offer great “potential” for neo-endogenous development, but for this potential to be realized, it must be recognized as such by internal and external actors (e.g. investors, consumers, local community etc.).

But how do we identify the specific conditions of the regional context, the local characteristics and drivers that can further rural development? When discussing the close links between the neo-endogenous approach and the LEADER programme, Bosworth et al. (2016) identified both the main characteristics and the differences between the various approaches to development (exogenous, endogenous and neo-endogenous ones) and in particular the specific underlying conditions, stating that neo-endogenous development is based simultaneously on specific context conditions represented by local resources and local participation, and dynamic interactions within the local area and with the world outside it, the capacity for networking and for innovation in the broadest sense of the word. It is therefore a mixed approach with both endogenous and exogenous elements, which is characterized by the relationships between the actors, and by sectors in which resources are fully mobilized and in which control of the process involves the active and dynamic interaction between various local and external forces. Therefore, and to fully understand this approach, it is fundamental to recognize the relationships between the different domains, in which an important role is played by institutions at different levels, who can train local people in new skills and ensure effective cooperation and a greater capacity for self-determination. In the presence of increasingly dynamic rural networks, this approach is based on the identification and enhancement of the values attributed to local areas, which are fundamental for the achievement of development objectives. As these same authors explain, the different exogenous, endogenous and neo-endogenous approaches have different characteristics and dynamics (see Table 1). If we focus on their main characteristics and differences, through an analysis of the regional context, this will allow us to better identify the main specific drivers. What distinguishes them among others is the dynamic strength of the premises on which they are

Table 1 Main characteristics of exogenous, endogenous and neo-endogenous development

Main characteristics	Exogenous development	Endogenous development	Neo-endogenous development
Key principle	Economies of scale and concentration	Harnessing local (natural, human and cultural) resources for sustainable development	Maximizing the value of local resources (territorial capital) Competitiveness based on local assets
Dynamic force	Urban growth poles (drivers exogenous to rural areas) (mainly from external drivers)	Local initiative and enterprise (mainly from internal drivers)	Networks of local actors connected to external influencers (a mix of internal and external drivers)
Functions of rural areas	Producing food and primary products for urban economies	Diverse service economies	The State is a facilitator Diverse production and service economies Interdependent urban demand remains critical for services and traditional sectors alike
Major rural development problems	Low productivity and peripherality	Limited capacity of areas/groups to participate in economic activity	Low service provision Imbalances between communities, ageing and inequality Remoteness, isolation and lack of critical mass, low awareness of local potential
Focus on rural development	Agricultural modernization	Capacity building (skills, institutions, infrastructure), overcoming exclusion	Holistic approach to include local empowerment, capacity building, overcoming exclusion, adding value to local resources, enhancing connectivity and promotion of innovation

Source (our rielaboration based on Bosworth et al., 2016, p. 431)

based and the focus on development goals. A perspective that leverages local capabilities, while ensuring the necessary integration and interaction with external flows, actors and resources. Development objectives can be achieved through the participation of local actors in internal and external development processes, networking and innovation. It is interesting to analyze the main characteristics of rural areas according to the different approaches in terms of capacity, “dynamic force”, functions, the main problems they face and the focus of rural development policies. If we look at “dynamic force”, the exogenous approach holds that growth is based on urban hubs and the main drivers for rural areas are external, while the endogenous approach focuses on local business initiatives. For the neo-endogenous approach, networking and innovation are fundamental and are interpreted as more intimately linked to the

regional context. The functions of rural areas also vary according to the particular approach for regional development. In the exogenous approach, rural areas are mainly oriented towards the production of food and primary products, aimed especially at supplying urban markets, and policies are mainly directed at growth and agricultural modernization objectives. In the neo-endogenous approach, there is a wider diversity of service-based economies in which urban demand focuses on traditional services and products, and development objectives are achievable through a more holistic approach, in which innovation plays an important role and has a broader meaning. A brief review of the main problems facing rural areas highlights continuing limitations associated with peripherality, low productivity and the chance to enjoy the full benefits of citizenship (isolation, civic participation, inequalities, etc.). In a bid to draw a parallel between the different approaches indicated by Bosworth et al. (2016) and the evolution of rural development policies, we can state that the transition from the exogenous to the neo-endogenous approach is very slow, especially in marginal areas, and has mainly affected the programmatic goals, while having less impact on operational aspects. In the next sections, within the framework of the objectives of the future CAP, and on the basis of the literature, we will be analyzing the main features of the innovation processes in rural areas in the Apulia region of southern Italy. Using data and cartographic analysis, we will present a case study which we believe is representative of rural Italy as a whole, due to the socioeconomic importance of agriculture in the region throughout history, and the transformations that farming processes have wrought on the landscape and the territory, and also because of its potential and the work that has been done within the context of LEADER in recent years. For these reasons, the Apulia region can be considered an excellent laboratory for experimentation on a national scale. Our preliminary analysis aims to describe the current situation of the region within the context of recent national dynamics and highlight its potential assets. In particular, we will be looking at the structural problems facing this area and various aspects of innovation. Little research has been done on these questions in rural areas, even though they will be key issues in community programming within the framework of the future CAP.

2 Main Characteristics of the Agricultural Systems of the Apulia Region: A Preliminary Analysis of the Structural Problems and Potential Drivers of Innovation

The analysis and interpretation of local agricultural systems in Italy using census data from 1970 to 2010 (the year of the last Italian agricultural census) reveal that important changes have taken place in their structural, economic and social organization. In particular, over this 40-year period, the following salient points emerge: changes in farm size; a reduction in the actually cultivated area relative to the total surface area and as a result in crop density; an evolution of agricultural systems in terms of

increased farm size and greater concentration of land ownership. In particular, there has been a fall in the number of farms due to the continuing crisis in Italian agriculture (Grillotti Di Giacomo & De Felice, 2021). This situation is continuing as can be seen from the data from the last Agricultural Census (Istat, 2022a, 2022b). This has led to the abandonment of farmland, especially in hilly or mountainous areas, with especially serious repercussions for small and medium-sized farms. Although there have been some changes in the survey field, if we compare the last available agricultural census (Istat, 2022a, 2022b) with previous censuses,² the process of concentration underway in the agricultural sector is clear. There has also been a widespread fall in the number of micro-farms, while even in medium-sized farms, there has been a reduction in the area farmed. At the same time, large and macro-farms are growing in size and number. Another important fact is the progressive reduction in the number of small and medium-sized farms. These are farms which received insufficient support from the CAP in the 1970s and 1980s, in that incentives were only available to farms of over 20 ha (Grillotti Di Giacomo, 2000; Grillotti Di Giacomo & De Felice, 2021). These characteristics largely explain the limits and problems that the agricultural sector is suffering today, above all in certain regions of Italy, such as Apulia, where it has historically played a fundamental role. All of these have also profoundly changed the agricultural and rural landscapes of the region, in some cases with an irreversible loss of biodiversity and valuable sites and landscapes (Labianca, 2022).

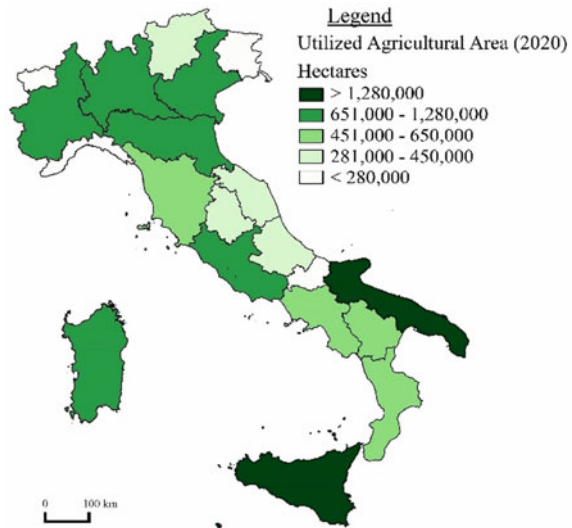
The Apulia region is an emblematic case at a national scale. It is a predominantly marginal region in Southern Italy in which the LEADER programme has played a leading role (see Labianca, 2021). It has been the subject of considerable experimentation within the LEADER framework, especially in recent years. It is one of the least mountainous regions in southern Italy and is covered by a predominantly tabular, slightly wavy-shaped landscape with a few higher areas in the north of the region with altitudes of just over 1000 m, such as the Subappennino Dauno and the Gargano. The prevalence of calcareous soils and the scarcity of surface waters, the building development along the entire coast and the flatness of the territory are among the various characteristics that highlight the physical-geographical individuality of this region within Italy. This individuality contrasts with often uniform agricultural landscapes predominantly carved out by man, who covered them with arable crops during a period when extensive commercial agriculture based on a pastoral cereal economy was dominant (Bissanti, 1977). Arable land is also quite common in more remote areas of the region alongside above all vines and olives. Apulia is one of the richest regions in woody crops and these contribute to the specific landscape characteristics of various sub-regions in which it is also possible to observe quite distinct methods of territorial organization as we move across the region from north to south. Almost all the major urban centres have a strong rural matrix. The region has various areas with strongly characteristic landscapes, such as (from north to south) the Gargano with important internal variations and along the coast, the Tavoliere, the Subappennino Dauno, the Terra di Bari, the Murge, Murgia dei Trulli

² From the data of farms, Utilized Agricultural Areas, Total Agricultural Areas in the last 5 agricultural censuses compared with the basic data of 1982 (see Istat, 2022a).

(southeast), Taranto and Salento, each with its own specific natural characteristics, geo-morphological conditions and forms of land use and with a specific configuration of human and productive settlements which have given rise to visible forms on the territory (see Bissanti, 1977). Many of the typical rural dwelling with typical forms of organization and distribution are the result of the numerous phenomena, physical, historical facts, anthropic activity and the complex relationships that are characteristic of the region over the time (Colamonico, 1970; Bissanti, 1977), despite representing an extraordinary territorial heritage, have today been abandoned or are scarcely recognized and valued.

Therefore, the agricultural landscape of Apulia has its own peculiar forms of organization, some of which have survived over the centuries, while others have evolved in line with society, the economy and culture. The strong socioeconomic role played by agriculture is widely documented and discussed in the main regional research (among others see Colamonico, 1926, 1939, 1960, 1970; Toschi, 1952; Bissanti, 1977) and from official data. According to data from the latest census by the National Institute of Statistics (Istat, 2022a, 2022b), Apulia has more farms (over 190,000 in 2020) than any other Italian region, many of which are managed directly by the owner or by family members. Although the number of farms has declined over time, as in Italy as a whole, they still represent an important resource for the local and national economy. The latest data for 2020 shows that Apulia has the second largest Utilized Agricultural Area in Italy (UAA) (after Sicily) with over about 1,200,000 hectares (Fig. 1). The region has the largest number of arable farms in Italy (over 91,000 farms or around 13% of all Italian arable farms with around 668,000 hectares of UAA) and of woody agricultural crops (about 170,000 farms, around 21% of the national total and 491,000 hectares of UAA). Although the agricultural sector remains important in the national and above all regional economy, the region continues to face numerous problems, especially in the latest programming cycles. As already discussed in the previous sections, if we consider the crucial factors specifically referred to in political agendas and in research and debate on neo-endogenous rural development, important aspects emerge from the statistical data available for the region regarding the dynamics of agricultural systems. Most recent data highlight that relatively few farms complement their incomes with other related business activities (for example tourism), which could represent important areas for growth and development. Only about 3,400 farms have at least one connected activity. The most popular, although with relatively low values (about 26%), are agro-tourism, the transformation of animal and vegetable products (20%), the industrial processing of agricultural products (12%), educational services such as farm schools and social agriculture (5%) and lastly crafts (1%). This aspect is accompanied by a limited capacity for innovation, instead widely considered a key factor for sustainable development. In fact, one indicator that could describe this aspect, is the number of innovative farms that have made at least one investment aimed at innovating production techniques or management in the three-year period 2018–2020. According to regional data, there were 9031 innovative farms in Apulia (the highest of all the regions of Southern Italy, 7% of all those at national level). However, this

Fig. 1 Italian regions by Utilized Agricultural Area (2020)



represents a small percentage of the total number of farms in the region (5% of the total) (Fig. 6).

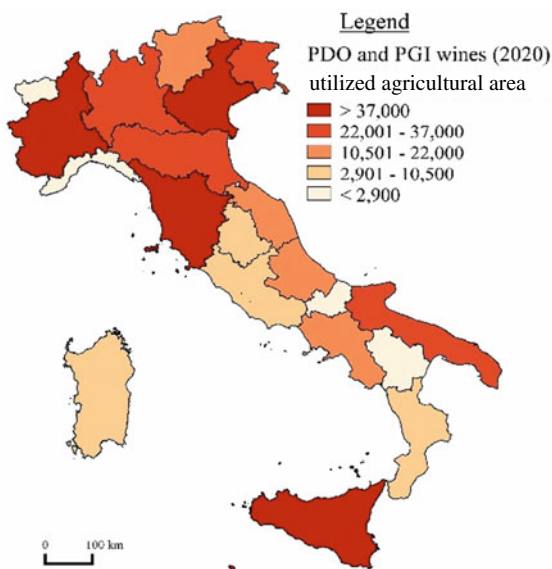
Even though vines and olive trees are of enormous, traditional socioeconomic importance in Apulia, one of the regions with the most woody crop farms in Italy, data on the added value of local products show that despite important recent interventions by the regional government, these products are not highly valued. In fact, the indicator at a national level concerning the certified production of quality wines shows that although the region is in third place after Veneto and Sicily for the number of farms operating in this sector (11,000), the UAA dedicated to these protected crops with certified designation of origin is quite low compared to the other two regions (32,000 hectares in Apulia, as opposed to 65,000 in Sicily and 90,000 in the Veneto region) (Fig. 2).

PDO stands for Protected Designation of Origin and PGI for Protected Geographical Indication. Source: drawn up by the author on the basis of data from Istat (2022a, b).

Considering the structure and dynamics of the agricultural systems of the region, we classified the farms into five size-based groups (according to the methodology proposed by Grillotti Di Giacomo, 2000): Class I, farms from 0 to 2 hectares; Class II, from 2 to 5 hectares; Class III, from 5 to 20 hectares, Class IV, from 20 to 50 hectares and Class V, over 50 hectares. According to the latest available data for 2020, the region (it ranks second in Italy for UAA after Sicily), 8% of farms belong to Class I (micro-farms), 10% to Class II, 24% to Classes III and IV and 34% to Class V.

Infact, in Apulia, as happens in the rest of Italy, the fragmentation of agricultural land varies from province to province, even within the same altitude range. In general, the larger farms are on flat, more fertile land that is easy to mechanize, while the

Fig. 2 Italian regions by agricultural area used for wines with **Protected Designation of Origin** and **Protected Geographical Indication** (2020). *Source* drawn up by the author on the basis of data from Istat (2022a, b)



micro-farms are typically found in hilly or mountainous areas (Grillotti Di Giacomo, 2000). Over the course of time, most of the provinces of Apulia have shown a balanced tabular distribution of farms of all sizes.³ The only exception is Foggia province (in the north of the region), which has more medium-sized and large farms. Interesting changes emerge from a comparison of the situation at the beginning and the end of the study period 1982–2010. To this end, we elaborated maps showing the distribution of the smallest and the largest farms (Class I and Class V), on the basis of detailed provincial data on agricultural systems for 1982 and 2010. In this way, these maps show the territorial distribution of micro and large farms at the beginning and end of this period. The maps reveal modest change in terms of farm size, although there was a generalized drop in the number of farms in all the provinces. Although micro-farms can still be found in all the provinces, they are particularly concentrated in the centre and south of the region. By contrast, there are more large farms in the north (the province of Foggia) where there is a large, wide plain. The situation has changed over time, above all in terms of the declining number of farms and the progressive abandonment of related activities, in particular breeding, which has been downsized and concentrated in certain well-defined areas of the region. Based on national data, Figs. 3 and 4 show that the number of farms has fallen in all the provinces in the region and that there has been a change in the organizational and production structure with a progressive reduction in particular in the number of farms. This has also happened in

³ The agricultural systems in Italy can be classified according to the dominant type of farm structure. Within this classification, six types of farm structure have been identified; five of these are dominated by farms of just one or two sizes (micro-small, medium-small, medium, medium-large, large), while the other, defined as “tabular”, shows a balanced mix of farms of all sizes (Grillotti Di Giacomo, 2000).

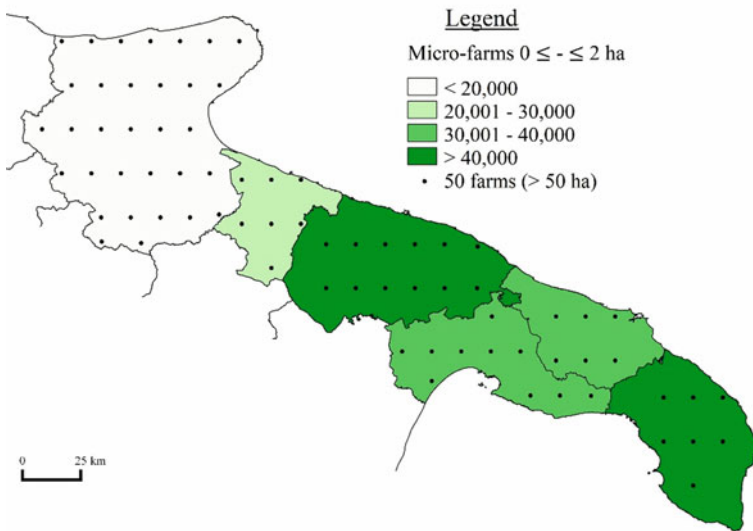


Fig. 3 Distribution of micro-farms ($0 \leq - \leq 2$ ha) and large farms (> 50 ha) by province—year 1982. *Source* Drawn up by the author on the basis of data from Istat

the provinces where farms were traditionally very common. This reduction affected micro-farms and, albeit to a less evident extent, large farms whose numbers fell in almost all the provinces from north to south, the only exception being the province of Bari (in the centre of the region) where this increase, although not particularly high in numerical terms, is a sign of a transformation towards larger farms, taking place in the province and at national level.

Figures 5 and 6 illustrate farm size and the propensity for innovation at a national level. A combined reading of these maps together with a calculation of the correlation index for each type of farm size, in particular for the Apulia region, shows that the propensity for innovation increases in line with farm size and therefore that medium-sized and large farms, which are normally located in areas with better infrastructure and services and a higher population, are more inclined to innovate.

However, the analysis of the areas of intervention and types of innovations (using Istat data for 2020) reveals a national and regional tendency to introduce a specific type of innovation, namely technical innovation. These include improvements to processes, in technology and in soil tillage and mechanization practices, while a small number of farms make innovations in organization and management, especially to make them more sustainable (waste, animal welfare, renewable energy, etc.). Innovation can also involve the promotion and enhancement of agricultural products or establishing links with complementary activities such as tourism, although in general this has been quite limited.

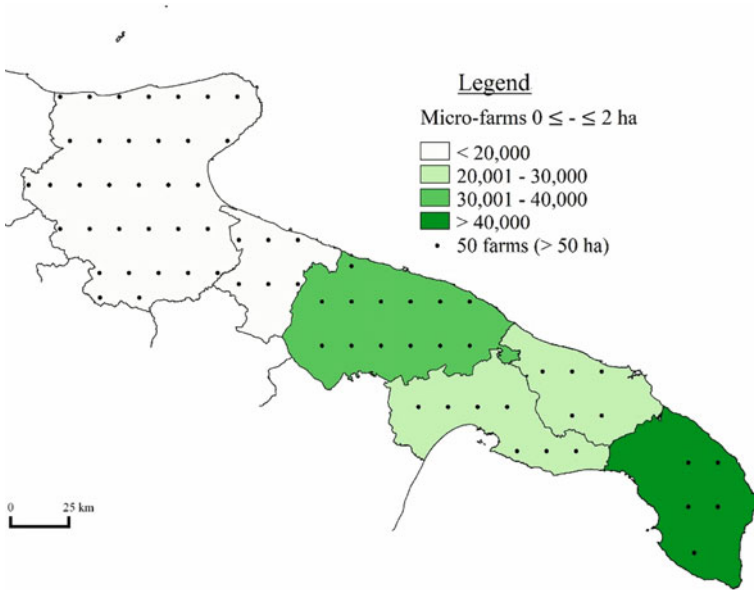


Fig. 4 Distribution of micro-farms ($0 \leq - \leq 2$ ha) and large farms (> 50 ha) by province—year 2010. *Source* Drawn up by the author on the basis of data from Istat

Fig. 5 Italian regions: distribution of large farms (2020). *Source* Drawn up by the author on the basis of data from Istat (2022a, b)

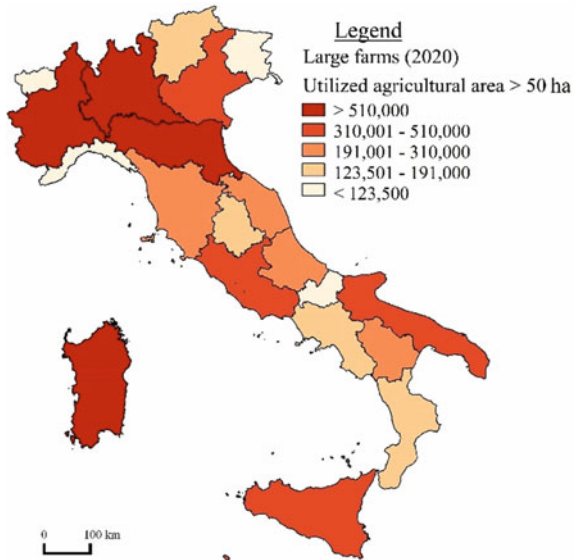
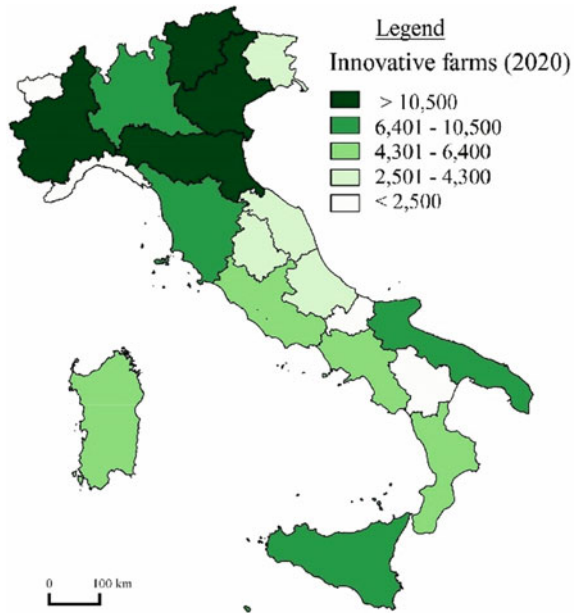


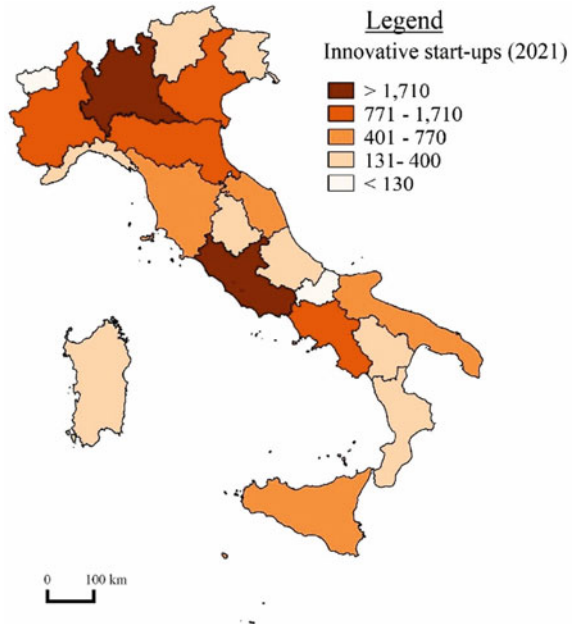
Fig. 6 Italian regions: distribution of innovative farms (2020). *Source* Drawn up by the author on the basis of data from Istat (2022a, b)



On the basis of the most recent data available at municipal level, another interesting indicator of innovative dynamics in rural areas is the number of innovative start-ups. In this case, innovative start-ups are defined as joint-stock companies which are less than five years old, with an annual turnover of less than five million euros. According to national legislation, they must also meet specific requirements relating to technological innovation. Figure 7 shows the regional distribution of innovative start-ups, of which there is a significant concentration in certain well-defined areas of the country, in particular in the north (in Lombardy, Piedmont, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna) and centre (Lazio and Campania) of the country, so confirming earlier findings. However, if these innovative companies are analyzed by sector, the result of the analysis shows that there are relatively few innovative start-ups in agriculture. Most of these companies operate in business services and manufacturing and a very small percentage (less than 1%) in the construction, agriculture and tourism sectors. This detailed analysis is important because it offers a measure of the innovative dynamism of these companies and their main characteristics, so confirming that sectors such as agriculture, which are important driving forces in rural areas, show little propensity for innovation and that when innovation is implemented, it is concentrated in specific geographical areas and focuses above all on specific technical advances or in production.

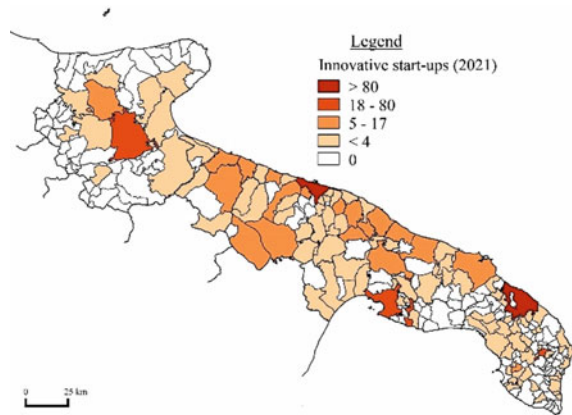
The detailed analysis for the Apulia region shows that the number of innovative start-ups per 100,000 inhabitants has grown steadily since 2015 by about 12%. This value is above the average for the South and Islands and is mainly concentrated in

Fig. 7 Italian regions: number of innovative start-ups in 2021. *Source* Drawn up by the author on the basis of data from Unioncamere (2021)



the major urban centres. The provincial and municipal analysis confirms the dominance of the business services sector and, at the other end of the scale, the small number of agriculture and tourism start-ups. Figure 8 shows the situation in Apulia by municipality updated to 2021. The map highlights that innovative start-ups are tightly concentrated in the major municipalities or provincial capitals, often located near research infrastructures and universities. The map also reveals the total absence of innovative start-ups in small municipalities characterized by progressive depopulation, ageing and poor access to basic services. Most of these are in remote, inner rural areas, some of which have already been subject to intervention within the context of the National Strategy for Inner Areas (Dipartimento per lo Sviluppo e la Coesione economica, 2014). The distribution of innovative start-ups across the province is very uneven, especially in the north and south, where these businesses are concentrated in just a few large municipalities, and most municipalities, especially the smaller ones, have no start-ups at all. The progressive growth of this indicator over time offers us an insight into the relative propensity for innovation and dynamism of the different territories. Similarly, the map showing the distribution by municipality presents a varying territorial pattern of innovation, which is more marked in some areas, and absent or almost absent in others.

Fig. 8 Apulia municipalities: number of innovative start-ups in 2021.
Source Drawn up by the author on the basis of data from Unioncamere (2021)



3 Conclusions

From this preliminary study, it is clear that changes are underway in the national and regional agricultural production systems. This requires a targeted analysis of the territorial context which allows us, through a qualitative and quantitative study, to highlight the major problems and the potential of rural areas and in particular the most marginal ones. This will enable local actors to seize the opportunities offered by the new CAP and act successfully to enhance local potential. As emerged in this study, it is clear that agriculture can no longer be treated in the traditional sense, as explicitly advocated in the political agendas and in the debate on neo-endogenous rural development, as a marginal, scarcely innovative sector with limited connections with other actors and sectors. Moreover, the preliminary data analysis clearly shows that there has been a process of concentration underway in the agricultural sector. This is manifested in the widespread reduction in the number of micro-farms, while even in medium-sized farms, there has been a reduction in the area farmed. At the same time, large and macro-farms are growing in size and number. The larger farms are oriented above all towards process, technological and mechanization innovations and show less interest in territorial connections with other productive sectors or in introducing innovations that could improve collaboration and networking. These could play a fundamental role above all in reducing the territorial gaps between urban hubs and more remote rural areas and in the processes of valorisation of territorial capital.

The trends observed here lead us to reflect on the future of the CAP and the action that must be taken on the ground in rural areas. As emerges from international programming documents, previous research and the regional analysis, important changes are underway which require strategic policy interventions that take the resulting territorial and landscape impacts into account, which, as discussed earlier and in the literature (Labianca, 2022), could reduce agricultural biodiversity and lead to the loss of ancient landscapes as happened in the past in regions such

as Apulia. A review of the main problems in these areas confirms the continuing constraints arising from their peripheral location, low productivity and the obstacles preventing local people from fully exercising their rights as citizens. In the absence of strategic, systemic and place-based interventions, there is a risk of fomenting exogenous economic growth policies aimed at productivity objectives, and improvements in processes and products (modernization of the agricultural sector), rather than prioritizing a form of rural development based above all on specific, mainly intangible characteristics of the local context, in a bid to enhance local resources and stimulate new practices and forms of regional innovation. All of these will require concerted action in the form of relationship-focused strategies within sustainable development that can support community participation and empowerment. These objectives, which are also set out in the Agenda 2030, may be difficult to achieve at a local level and therefore highlight the need for multi-scale networks and governance, which can encourage the involvement of local stakeholders in the implementation on the ground of sustainable change processes and innovation in rural areas.

In addition, a better knowledge of the characteristics of the agricultural systems, of the farms in a particular area, their evolution (cultivated area, size, organization, management, etc.) over time and their specific networks, dynamics and conditions within the territorial context will enable us to gain a better understanding of the direction in which the primary sector and rural areas are heading. It will also give us a better idea of the areas where intervention is most required in order to start and/or encourage initiatives aimed at enhancing the primary sector with a view to sustainability, as expressly indicated in the main international agendas. This is essential to enable us to discover what actions are needed on a regional scale, while taking into account these important evolutionary trends, remembering that above all in the new programming system, several goals come into play (support for biodiversity, food safety, improving the position of farmers in the value chain, greater attention to research, technology and digitalization, improving ecosystem services and preserving habitats and landscapes, fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food systems, climate change and environmental degradation, promoting employment, growth, social inclusion and local development in rural areas, including bioeconomy and sustainable forestry, supporting the income of businesses and resilience across the territory, etc.). In order to achieve these goals, it is necessary to take specific, concrete measures in an integrated, systemic way, focusing on local innovation and knowledge. A gap between the knowledge of the territorial context in which the strategy is to be developed and undertaken, planning and implementation of the objectives is no longer acceptable, as emerges from this preliminary study and when we analyze the main characteristics and drivers of rural development approaches. A general development strategy must be implemented for which purposes a specific study to support the strategies and interventions must be carried out.

Learning and knowledge should be seen as key factors for entrepreneurship and innovation, especially in marginal areas. There is a tendency towards centralization and co-localization, and a low propensity for innovation, cooperation and integration in agriculture, especially in marginal rural ones. These factors are often used to justify the standardization of models and the reintroduction of exogenous approaches to

economic growth. In the future, therefore, priority should be given to acquiring a better knowledge of the different territorial contexts, developing appropriate methods and tools for regional study and research.

Regarding practices, innovative ones can be initiated by entrepreneurs and favourable local contexts and dynamics can trigger sustainable rural development processes. As Fløysand and Jakobsen (2011, pp. 341–342) argue, successful experiences in rural areas seem to motivate economic actors to maximize social capital in addition to profit, stimulating “hybrid forms of capitalism” with a balanced mix of internal and external resources (in particular knowledge, human and economic capital). This “local buzz” together with “global pipelines” can facilitate or limit innovation itself.

In this sense, actors and intermediaries with expert knowledge will therefore play a strategic, actively collaborating in all the phases in an interactive, complementary manner. This will necessarily include the implementation and dissemination of the results to try to encourage new actors to contribute and participate. New combinations of different sources of knowledge, actors, technology and investments must be developed in order to structure the exchange of knowledge and promote innovation processes. This can be achieved by creating specific flexible innovation ecosystems, based on the study and analysis of the contextual factors and covering different territories, policy and strategic fields.

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Successful Projects in Rural Development. Case Studies

Convergences and Divergences in Rural Community Resilience—Case Studies from Ireland and the United Kingdom



Alistair Adam Hernández and Brendan O’Keeffe

Abstract The concept of rural community resilience has gained increased traction among academics, policy-makers and rural development practitioners. Resilience is associated with communities’ abilities to manage structural change, deal with shocks and recover or ‘bounce-back’ from setbacks. Yet, there is a dearth of clarity regarding the concept, and there is a need for a greater understanding of the drivers and inhibitors of rural community resilience. This chapter seeks to address these gaps, and it sets out a multi-dimensional lens through which rural community resilience and vibrancy can be understood and measured. It presents two case studies—one from Ireland and one from the United Kingdom—both of which used self-assessment tools and action-research methodologies. While the geographical contexts were different, the case study findings converge to underscore the multi-dimensional nature of resilience, the significance of place and the influence of economic and institutional externalities in determining levels of resilience and vibrancy. The findings reveal the importance of good governance along with effective structures, strong local leadership and the inclusion of diverse voices in local decision-making. The research results also point to the need for ongoing investment in animation and capacity-building and basic local services. As rural communities seek to bounce-back from the effects of the recent pandemic, there is a need for concerted efforts to reinvigorate and sustain local social capital.

Keywords Resilience · Vibrancy · Community · Rural development · Assessment

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1 Introduction

Resilience, which is associated with communities’ capacity and abilities to withstand shocks, adapt to change and prepare for possible challenges, is increasingly coming into sharp focus as the pace of rural change accelerates. This chapter presents two case studies—one from Ireland and one from the United Kingdom. Despite their contrasting geographies and although the case study methodologies differ, striking similarities emerge in respect of the factors that promote and/or inhibit rural community resilience and vibrancy.

1.1 Change and Challenges Affecting Rural Communities

Rural communities are becoming increasingly diverse. Synonymity with primary sector economic activities has dissipated, as rural areas are now multifunctional spaces, performing a wide range of social and economic functions (Nowack et al., 2022; Wilson, 2010). Land-uses have been diversifying as high-nature value farming and the conservation of natural resources and biodiversity are increasingly perceived to be essential to society’s environmental resilience (O’Rourke & Finn, 2020). At the same time, however, there is an intense pressure on farmers to produce cheap food for a growing global population, while science universally points to the need to respect the health of the biosphere (European Environment Agency, 2022). Rural landscapes and socio-economic activities are being oriented to enabling society to withstand contemporary challenges and to respond to possible future shocks, particularly in respect of energy. Rural restructuring, de-industrialisation, the growth of service industries, counterurbanisation, youth out-migration, the rise of long-distance commuting and digitisation are among the many ebbs and flows that are currently driving rural change (Schmied, 2022).

Across most of rural Europe, communities are ageing, and service providers are challenged to respond to growing demands for health and social care in rural communities. E-health solutions are coming to the fore, while in many communities, the benevolence and altruism of local citizens are driving local service provision, as neo-liberal policies have weakened state welfare regimes (Bütow & Gómez Jiménez, 2015; Steinführer et al., 2021; Taylor-Gooby et al., 2017). While area-based and citizen-led initiatives contribute to place-making and serve to galvanise endogenous actions, they can place considerable responsibilities on volunteers and stretch the social contract between state and citizen (Douglas, 2017).

The diversity of rural communities is increasingly evident in their demographic and social compositions (European Network for Rural Development, 2010). This process is being driven by counterurbanisation and in-migration (Kordel et al., 2018; Sandow & Lundholm, 2023). Generally, this inflow of persons has been smaller than the outflow of young persons, especially from remote and structurally weak rural areas, but it has helped to infuse new skills and creativity and to foster economic

diversification. Rural communities and policy-makers have come to identify opportunities in respect of digital / connected / remote working, and smart village methodologies are gaining increased currency (González-Leonardo et al., 2022; Mariotti et al., 2023; Visvizi et al., 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a light on various aspects of rural community resilience. While distance from health services poses challenges for many communities, rural areas became refuges for persons seeking space and solace during the darkest days of the pandemic (González-Leonardo et al., 2022). Meanwhile, rural residents became more strident in celebrating and valorising their local natural assets. More recently, the war in Ukraine and the displacement of millions of persons has caused rural communities across the EU to open their doors to refugees. While the arrival of refugees from Ukraine may put strains on already stretched health, education and social services, it is bringing opportunities in respect of harnessing social capital, and exemplars are emerging of intercultural initiatives in several rural communities.

1.2 Particularly Dynamic Rural Communities

The war in Ukraine has elucidated many of the vulnerabilities inherent in rural communities and underscored the need for resilience. While increased fuel costs have affected all citizens, and governments have sought to mitigate their effects, rural residents and businesses have had to be more resilient than most, given their distance from services and markets—and their greater dependence on fossil fuels. European agriculture's dependence on Russian fuel and fertiliser and the wider dependence on Ukrainian grain highlight the unsustainability of industrial agriculture and food security's exposure to the vagrancies of geopolitics (World Economic Forum, 2023). In contrast, societies and communities that have emphasised local food systems and the circular economy have generally been more resilient in the face of current challenges (Béné, 2020; Nichols et al., 2022).

The universal need to promote a just transition to a zero-carbon society has seen some rural communities forming energy cooperatives and reducing their carbon footprints (Vita et al., 2020). The revolution in information and communications technology (ICT) has seen rural communities overcome physical distances and promote new modes of working and service provision (Mariotti et al., 2023). Particularly dynamic rural communities are harnessing the life skills and knowledge capital of older persons and promoting inter-generational knowledge transfers (McAreavey, 2022). Across rural Europe and beyond we see rural communities demonstrating resilience—turning challenges into opportunities and future-proofing their territories. While there are many drivers and stimulants of resilience, participatory approaches like the LEADER / CLLD methodology continuously emerge as one of the most

significant enablers thereof (Chatzichristos & Barraí, 2023; Chatzichristos & Perimenis, 2022). The two rural communities presented as case studies in this chapter illustrate how citizen participation and the complex articulation of a collective will for positive change have shaped local-level responses to the need for resilience (Bourke, 2017).

1.3 Problematising the Focus on ‘Best Practices’ and ‘Capable Communities’ in Rural Development

Up to the 1990s, much of the narrative about rural communities tended to focus on challenges. The concepts of rural restructuring and indeed ‘rural crisis’ tended to predominate in academic and policy circles, as stakeholders sought to devise ways in which to mitigate the fallout associated with the intensification of productivist agriculture and the wind-down of extractive industries. Interventions sought to find ways of reducing structural unemployment among displaced workers, as rural areas were frequently classified as ‘laggards’, and investments tended to focus on uniform and analogous capital investments. The advent of LEADER in the context of geographically differentiated and area-based approaches, in the 1990s, shifted the discourse towards territorial assets, diversification, competitiveness and collaboration—within and among rural territories.

While there has been a shift in the rural development narrative, since the advent of LEADER, this has not been accompanied by corresponding resource and policy shifts, and a growing number of scholars warn against the dangers of an uncritical and positivist rhetoric, increasingly supported by terms such as ‘empowerment’, ‘self-organisation’, ‘capacity-building’, ‘social capital’, ‘adaptability’ or ‘resilience’. This attitude reflects the prevailing, largely uncritical assumption that persists in the context of community empowerment: that it happens in a largely spontaneous, self-regulating, inclusive and organic manner (Skerratt & Steiner, 2013, p. 321; Steiner & Markantoni, 2014, p. 2) This ever more established discourse increases expectations on rural communities in a risky way (Cheshire et al., 2015). Furthermore, research repeatedly shows that due to their very different starting points and resource endowments, the endogenous and participatory approach to rural development practised so far mainly benefits already well-articulated, networked and empowered communities, while marginalised, less participatory and capable communities are left out (Shucksmith, 2000, p. 2; Skerratt & Steiner, 2013, p. 323).

2 Literature Review and Discussion

2.1 Defining, Describing and Modelling Rural Community Resilience and Vibrancy

The phenomenon of dynamic rural communities, as referenced in the introduction, is associated with a wide array of adjectives in the theory and practice of rural development. These include, *inter alia*, resilient, vibrant, vital, robust, adaptable, transformational, future-proofed and sustainable communities. This chapter highlights the first two adjectives and focuses on a proactive and transformational understanding of the underlying concepts, enabling a discussion about how rural communities can shape the processes of change (Vogt, 2015, pp. 15–16) affecting them.

Without doubt, these are all complex, multifaceted (Glass et al., 2022) and somewhat fuzzy (e.g. Christopherson et al., 2010, p. 7; Davoudi et al., 2012, p. 299) concepts. As noted by expert social ecologists in resilience assessment (Walker et al., 2010, pp. 4–18), it is essential to clarify a set of questions to adequately conceptualise any system's resilience: '*The resilience of what?*' Or what is our reference system we want to evaluate? '*The resilience to what?*' Or what challenges and disturbances is our system currently facing, or will it be facing in future? And finally, '*What outcome makes the system resilient?*'—what do we consider to be a satisfactory or successful response to challenges? Moreover, multiple space and time scales must be considered, as communities not only aim to '*bounce-back*', absorbing shocks and recovering quickly from sudden critical events in the short-term, but also aim to '*bounce forward*' and continuously adapt to ongoing adversities and anticipate future challenges in the long-term. This forward-looking perspective is what has come to be defined as the evolutionary (Scott, 2013, p. 601) or reflexive understanding of resilience (Böschchen et al., 2017, pp. 175–176).

Community resilience, preponderantly in rural settings, is associated with the existence, development and use of community resources by its members (Magis, 2010, p. 402), enabling the community to thrive in an environment of change, uncertainty and unpredictability. Others define community resilience as a set of shared capabilities or skills used for positive community development (Norris et al., 2008, pp. 135–136). Further evidence has emerged that long-term participatory approaches and development processes engender resilience (Cheshire et al., 2015). Resilient communities often have network-like and '*collaborative alliances*' at local or regional level, in which (ideally) administration, politics, business and civil society jointly shape the change processes on the basis of specific projects, strategies and innovative forms of governance organisation (Cheshire et al., 2015, p. 31; Markantoni et al., 2018, p. 4). This is mostly related to a (pro-)active, vibrant citizenship capable of self-organising (Cheshire et al., 2015, p. 17; Markantoni et al., 2018, p. 10; Steiner & Markantoni, 2014, p. 3). Finally, external support (funding, skills, full-time staff, etc.) and professional process facilitation are often both the initial spark and long-term accompaniment of resilient communities (Steiner & Markantoni, 2014, p. 15).

In the last two and a half decades an increased interest in modelling rural community resilience for on-site self-assessment, scientific explanation and practitioner-driven intervention can be ascertained. Noteworthy are among others the Canadian ‘*Community Resilience Manual*’ (Colussi, 2000), the ‘*Dimensions of community resilience*’ (Magis, 2010) and the applied research carried out by Steiner and Markantoni (2014) entitled ‘*Unpacking community resilience through Capacity for Change*’. A recent Delphi survey, conducted in the context of Scottish rural community development proposes, assesses resilience by means of eight enabling or constraining factors ranging, among others, from participation, governance or networks over to entrepreneurial, infrastructural and environmental elements (Glass et al., 2022, pp. 13–14). Table 4, in the aforementioned doctoral thesis (Adam Hernández, 2021, pp. 54–55), offers a comprehensive review of such modelling approaches in rural community development.

2.2 Attempting to Grasp and Assess Rural Resilience and Vibrancy

Although several authors note that a resilience perspective is integral to best practices in regional and spatial planning sciences (Folke, 2006; Lukesch et al., 2010; Swanstrom, 2008), the concept remains abstract and difficult to integrate into rural development practice (Steiner & Markantoni, 2014, p. 2). As Gall et al. (2022, p. 18) state, in respect of the aforementioned Delphi survey ‘*the variability in interpretations of the concept, the importance of non-quantifiable criteria and the variability in underlying community capacity to develop resilience also suggest that accurate and comparative measurement of the concept is likely to be very challenging in practice*’.

The assessment model or procedure delineated in the following section attempts to tackle the challenges associated with the measurability of rural community resilience and vibrancy. We do not purport to compare the results offered by the analysed case studies. Instead, we seek to share and discuss a possible operationalisation (dimensions, variables, indicators) and methodology, tested by action research, in order to enrich the applied research discourse and rural development practices.

2.2.1 Rural Community Resilience Assessment Framework

The following evaluation framework for rural community resilience was originally developed in the aforementioned doctoral thesis (Adam Hernández, 2021). It draws on an exhaustive literature review in the disciplines of psychology, social ecology and community development. The framework consists of three sets of perspectives and eight dimensions with a bundle of indicators for each dimension, and it contributes to understanding how rural community resilience can be determined and fostered (Table 1).

Table 1 Dimensions and indicators of the resilience assessment framework

I. Dimension—social relationships and networks		V. Dimension—key people and leadership			
Indicators	Bonding capital	Trust	Indicators	Diversity	Vision
	Bridging capital	Sense of belonging	Indicators	Initiation	Facilitation
	Linking capital	Identity		Enabling	
	Reciprocity	Active social participation			
<i>II. Dimension—learning and self-reflection</i>				<i>VI. Dimension—diversity and integration</i>	
Ind	Learning culture	Knowledge and skills	Ind	People	Local economy
	Willingness to experiment	Self-reflection		Clubs, associations, groups and activities	Nature and the environment
<i>III. Dimension—values, attitudes, and beliefs</i>			<i>VII. Dimension—balance between people, environment and economy</i>		
Ind	Positive experiences	Self-efficacy	Ind	Social well-being	Economic well-being
	Optimism	Social support		Environmental well-being	
	Goal orientation				

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

I. Dimension—social relationships and networks		V. Dimension—key people and leadership	
<i>IV. Dimension—community action and decision-making</i>			
Ind	Processes	Conflicts	Ind
	Role of authorities and administration	Communication	
			e.g. Childcare services, possibilities of care for the elderly, health care, schools, possibilities for further education and training, public facilities, private services to the public, possibilities for leisure and cultural activities, fire brigade and emergency services, real estate market and house building, public mobility, public transport infrastructure, water management, water supply and sewage disposal

Adapted and further developed for the fieldwork in the Wooler case study from Adam-Hernández and Hartteisen (2020, p. 31)

1. Perspective—A rural community with vibrant relationships

Within this first perspective, attention is focused on a locality's social space, particularly its configuration, orientation and functioning. Generally, more resilient rural communities can be recognised by the fact that activities, voluntary work and social dynamics emerge from the bottom-up and are inclusive and diverse.

I. Dimension: Social Relationships and Networks

The density and functionality of social relationships are positively associated with resilience. The sum of contacts and relations among individuals underpins social networks that function based on trust and reciprocity. Furthermore, a trusting and a supportive atmosphere, genuine opportunities for active social participation, a strong sense of identity, or a strong sense of belonging ensure greater resilience.

II. *Dimension: Values, Attitudes and Beliefs*

This dimension encompasses communities' worldview, and it embraces concepts such as self-efficacy, willingness to change, optimism, vision, or drive. More resilient rural communities provide inhabitants with regular positive emotions—engendered by festivities or other communal attractions and activities. In these communities, people perceive an atmosphere of social support.

III. *Dimension: Diversity and Integration*

A pronounced diversity of residents and economic, environmental, and cultural resources generally leads to higher degrees of resilience. The diversity of, for example, the age, background, culture, opinions, experiences, or knowledge capital of the inhabitants can provide a basis for division of labour, specialisation and innovation. Varied economic and environmental resources offer a wealth of options, thereby enabling communities to face the prevailing challenges. Diversity may, however, conflict with the simplicity and efficiency of decision-making processes, and consensus could be undermined by the variety of actors and interests.

2. Perspective: A rural community with effective actors, structures and processes

The second and stronger institutional perspective, in the resilience model, looks at the actors, structures and processes that enable the community, as a whole, to act in an autonomous, democratic, coordinated and self-determined way as effectively as possible.

IV. *Dimension: Key People and Leadership*

'Choral' leadership with diverse and representative leaders, is associated with higher resilience, and it is best achieved by limiting mandate periods and strategically fostering young talent through proactive succession management. Good leadership embodies positive attributes such as integrity, determination, mediation competence and vision.

V. *Dimension: Community Action and Decision-Making*

Another key dimension for a higher degree of resilience is that of facilitating well-functioning collective action and decision-making processes. So-called polycentric governance systems, built upon transparent and efficient communication, are the source of institutional diversity, broad participation, a strong culture of learning and experimentation and improved system networking. A challenge can emerge, however, when dealing with conflicting aims and interests, and decision-making can result in winners and losers.

3. Perspective: A rural community capable of developing sustainable solutions

Within the third perspective, the focus is on the creative, reflexive and entrepreneurial process of ensuring the sustainability of the rural community. This requires a cyclical process of understanding, experimentation and evaluation, which contributes to higher resilience—especially by activating and implementing local ‘swarm intelligence’.

VI. *Dimension: Learning and Self-Reflection*

Learning processes take place in a somewhat more resilient rural community if suitable learning and meeting places exist and appropriate methods and offers are available. In addition, reflection, self-learning, and the integration of learning results into practices are conducive to learning processes. The development of an innovative climate, open to experimentation, in which skills and knowledge exchange are possible can, therefore, foster resilience.

VII. *Dimension: Balance Between People, Environment and Economy*

Rural areas in general, but peripheral areas in particular, struggle to offer sustainable economic development prospects due to the prevailing logic of a market economy. Moreover, demographic change stands in the way of generational renewal and can jeopardise services and infrastructure provision. Landscape and natural resources need to be enhanced in a balanced manner without compromising economic development opportunities, the common good or the environment’s health. Moreover, a sufficient income, job opportunities, personal security, health services and recreational facilities impact on the social dimension of resilience.

VIII. *Dimension: Basic Public Services and Infrastructure*I. Perspective—A rural community with vibrant relationships

Adequate access to facilities for health, education, security, and civil protection is essential to maintain the resilience of a rural community. Often, however, service providers or local administrations, lack the capacity to influence the provision of services and the maintenance of basic infrastructure. Despite the powerlessness this can cause for rural dwellers, creative community engagement and social economy models can be decisive in finding innovative solutions to ensure adequate basic services and infrastructure.

3 Case Studies and Discussion

Our two case study communities have had to contend with many of the changes and pressures that were mentioned at the start of this chapter. Yet, they have responded differently, and in their own ways, to the need to be resilient. Milltown (Ireland) has sought to promote resilience through participatory planning and place-making, while Wooler (UK) has applied social economy principles.

3.1 Case Study in Ireland—Milltown, County Kerry

The community of Milltown, County Kerry, which is in the South-West of Ireland, is the first of our two case studies. In many respects, Milltown is emblematic of rural communities whose features and dynamics are shaped by externalities, particularly spillover effects from urban areas and metropolitan zones. Its population has grown substantially over recent decades, and while Milltown may be considered to exhibit demographic and economic resilience, the socio-economic changes it has been experiencing have provoked challenges in respect of several other dimensions of resilience, not least the provision of public services and infrastructure and the safeguarding of natural and cultural resources. Moreover, Milltown's efforts to promote resilience underscore the importance of vertical (civil society—institutional) and horizontal (intra- and inter-community) linkages, relationships and collaborative governance in enabling place-making.

3.1.1 Context of the Fieldwork and Research

The data sources, for this case study, include a self-assessment among local citizens, a comprehensive demographic and socio-economic profile of the locality, and the researchers' participation in several local initiatives including the following: town hall meetings to promote community engagement in place-making; collaboration with the planning authorities to inform planning policy; and preparatory work for a town master plan. This case study draws on material that has been gathered longitudinally, albeit not continuously, since 2014, through various engagements, some of which were funded by Kerry County Council. More recent (since 2021) research is part of an ERASMUS + project entitled 'Rebound', which focuses on the theme of rural community resilience.¹ The findings from these research strands are presented in the following paragraphs.

¹ For information about Rebound, please see: <https://ruralresilience.eu/>.



Fig. 1 Aerial photographs of Milltown, County Kerry (Irl.) in the years 2000 (left) and 2017 (right). *Source* Ordnance Survey of Ireland

3.1.2 Introduction and General Description of Milltown

Milltown has a population of almost 1000, and there is a similar number of persons residing on farms and in the open countryside around the town. Milltown is the fastest-growing settlement in County Kerry (administrative division, pop. 150,000) (Walsh & Caoimh, 2020). Milltown’s recent population growth is associated with its location in the centre of County Kerry—within 20 km of the county’s main towns and employment centres: Tralee, Killarney and Killorglin.

The boom in construction, between the years 2000 and 2010, and the influx of newcomers has brought significant changes to Milltown. While the town continues to act as a service and commercial centre for the people of Mid-Kerry, and farming remains an important driver of the local economy, Milltown has also come to exhibit the characteristics of a dormitory town. The town’s morphology is associated with a medieval ecclesiastical settlement (Kilcoleman Abbey) and eighteenth-century demesne (Knightly, 2020). The following aerial photographs illustrate the scale and nature of Milltown’s physical growth between the years 2000 and 2017 (Fig. 1).

Locally, Milltown Community and Chamber Alliance is the main driver of community-led local development. The alliance acts as an umbrella and representative body for civil society organisations locally.

3.1.3 Findings on Rural Resilience and Vibrancy

In 2015, South Kerry Development Partnership (SKDP), which is the LEADER Local Action Group/local development company (LDC) for South Kerry (pop. 60,000), published a study that had measured vibrancy across thirty-three geographical communities. Milltown was among the communities included in this research (O’Keeffe, 2015). Methodologically, the study took a largely quantitative approach, and it adapted a survey questionnaire that had been applied in Canada (Stolte & Metcalfe, 2009) to capture citizens’ perceptions of rural vibrancy. The data from the social survey were complemented by a series of workshops with civil society

organisations that discussed their roles and experiences in promoting and enabling resilience. These deliberations underscored the significance of animation and capacity-building, including access to development officers, and the application of the LEADER specificities (Cejudo & Navarro, 2020; Konečný, 2019) in fostering and sustaining community resilience.

Additionally, the research team used metrics that had been specified in Ireland’s National Spatial Strategy (Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2002) to undertake a mapping of the geographical distribution of public services and infrastructure across South Kerry. This spatial analysis indicated a correlation between investment in public service provision and high levels of economic vibrancy, while poor public service provision and a lack of investment in infrastructure were associated with a sense of despondency and youth out-migration. The following graphs (Fig. 2) show the mean scores on a range of economic and socio-cultural indicators, in Milltown and other South Kerry communities, as derived from the self-assessment survey among local citizens.

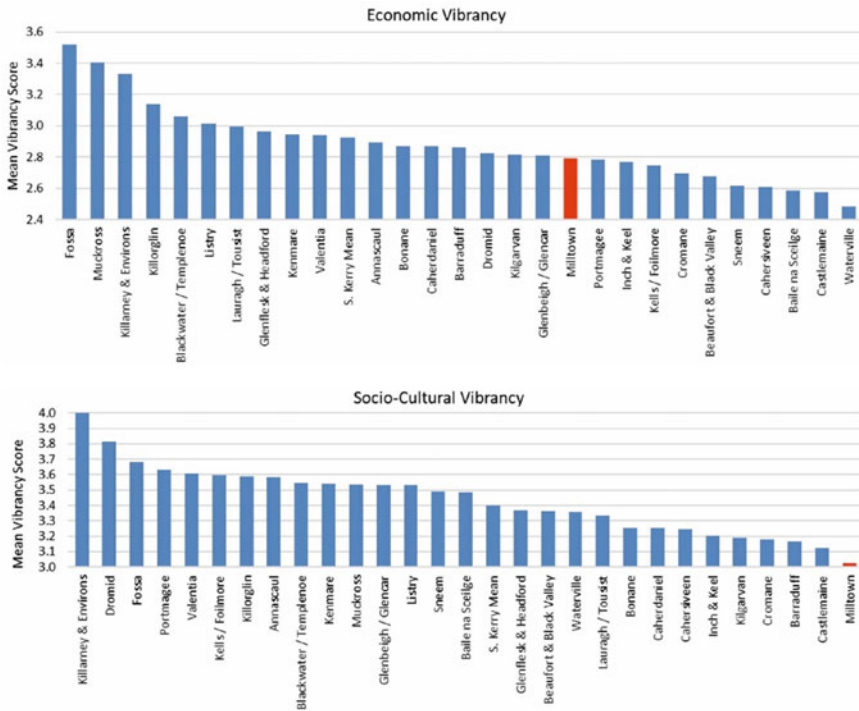


Fig. 2 Mean vibrancy scores in Milltown and other South Kerry communities. *Source* O’Keeffe (2015)

The study findings were widely disseminated among community and institutional stakeholders, and they were formally endorsed by Kerry County Council (sub-regional authority). Subsequently, in 2016, Kerry County Council funded the undertaking of a detailed socio-economic profile of Milltown and its environs. This research documented Milltown’s population growth and increased diversity. The profile highlighted the fact that while Milltown appeared to be doing well, as evidenced by population growth and new-house building, its social and economic resilience was under pressure. Vacancy and dereliction in Milltown’s core were symptomatic of the doughnut effect—a hollowing-out of town/village centres due to commercial and residential developments on the periphery, a phenomenon that blights many rural towns (Hölzel & de Vries, 2021; Turley et al., 2014). In her assessment of Milltown’s spatial development over the past twenty years, Kearns (2022, p. 61) observed:

“That development pattern led to the situation Milltown found itself in late 2019: a dispersed community, its population expanding at triple the county average; woefully under-served by basic facilities; and with little reason for new residents to spend time in the town and develop a sense of attachment to the place. The core of the town was plagued by dereliction. Many valuable heritage assets were underutilised”.

Kerry County Council and the Milltown Community and Chamber Alliance convened a series of town hall meetings to consider the implications of Milltown’s changing profile. These gatherings noted the need for investment in community amenities and facilities to cater for Milltown’s growing population. They also identified a need to enable and support newcomers to play a more active role in community development activities and local groups. While the Community and Chamber Alliance sought to progress, the recommendations arising from the town hall reactions to the community profile, its capacity to do so was limited by its lack of support staff and its reliance on volunteers. While Kerry County Council committed to ongoing engagement with the Community and Chamber Alliance, human resource deficits mitigated against systemic collaboration. Moreover, the county council’s local operations had to be reconfigured following a 2018 re-drawing of municipal boundaries.

Notwithstanding the challenges, it was evident that Milltown people increasingly realised that local citizens were going to have to take a more active role in community development. Local and regional media (radio and newspapers) picked up on the discussions. *The Kerryman* (local newspaper) asked ‘What’s next for Milltown?’ (Evans, 2017), while the *Irish Examiner* (national newspaper) described Milltown as a Celtic Tiger² town at a crossroads (O’Sullivan, 2017).

The evidence garnered and discussion had between 2016 and 2018 also caused the local authority to view Milltown differently. Up to then, Milltown had been seen as part of the solution to housing and land-use pressures in larger towns; building land and housing were more affordable in Milltown than elsewhere in Kerry, and the

² The ‘Celtic Tiger’ is a term referring to the economy of Ireland from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s, a period of rapid real economic growth fuelled by foreign direct investment. The boom was dampened by a subsequent property bubble which resulted in a severe economic downturn (Wikipedia).

town’s wastewater treatment facility had (and still has) capacity to take more connections. Drawing on the statistical evidence, Kerry County Council noted the need for investment in Milltown to redress the service provision gaps that had emerged and to ensure a more socially cohesive community.

Community planning for resilience

In 2020, Kerry County Council began work to renew the development plan for the Corca Dhuibhne Municipal District, to which Milltown belongs (since 2018). Despite its limited resources and the absence of clear precedents, Kerry County Council supported a process to enable citizen engagement in the formulation of a submission to inform the Corca Dhuibhne Local Area Plan (2021–2027). The Chamber Alliance seized this opportunity and sought to broaden it to promote vision planning. In speaking to the local media, the alliance’s chair stated,

“this is to develop a coherent vision of what do we want Milltown to be in 10 years’ time, in 20 years’ time. We want people to move here, not to be a commuter town. We want people to settle here and live here... What makes a community? The fabric of the town, the social spaces, transport. Hopefully, it will encompass everything,” (cited in Kelleher, 2021).

The Chamber Alliance’s efforts to engage local citizens in place-making were hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions on in-person gatherings. Consequently, community engagement events had to take place online, and while these were characterised by solution-focused discussions, the total number of participants did not exceed fifty. Citizen engagement was also promoted through an online survey questionnaire. Over 300 responses were received, and citizens expressed their perceptions of place using an adapted version of the Place Standard planning tool (Government of Scotland, 2023). Not only did this survey generate data and enable the Chamber Alliance to identify baselines, needs and priorities, it engendered a series of conversations about a vision of place—a feature of the Place Standard lauded by many planners (Lawlor, 2018). The following figure (Fig. 3) shows the mean recorded scores on each dimension of the Place Standard.

These citizen-facing actions were complemented by a series of interviews with local employers, service providers, NGOs (including South Kerry Development Partnership) and statutory bodies (including Kerry County Council). These horizontal and vertical stakeholder engagements culminated in a vision of Milltown as a resilient place that would experience more modest levels of population growth, more robust economic resilience, improved service provision—particularly the development of green and recreational spaces for all age cohorts, and a greater valorisation of cultural and heritage resources, including the town’s built environment and the demesne landscape of the former Kilcoleman Abbey.

In order to articulate the emerging vision and priorities, in the form of a submission to Kerry County Council, the Chamber Alliance hosted a Geodesign workshop, at which stakeholders mapped their ideas and assessed the community’s proposals’ alignment with the draft local area plan (LAP) that Kerry County Council had prepared. While there was a meeting of minds between the chamber alliance and county council on most matters, there was a clear divergence in respect of the

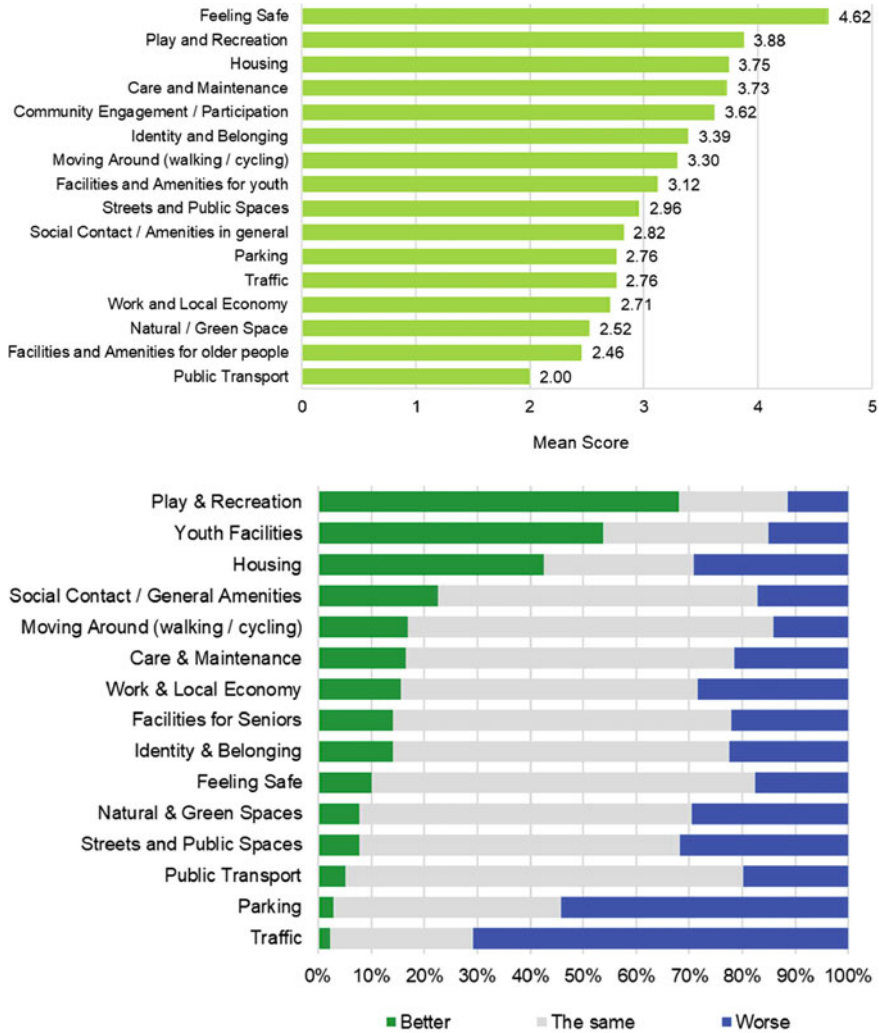


Fig. 3 Mean scores on the place standard, Milltown, 2020 and perceived changes since 2015. *Source* Own representation Authors’ elaboration

construction of a bypass road. The local authority argued that the construction of a new road was necessary in order to reduce travel times between two of the county’s main towns, while the Chamber Alliance expressed concerns about a potential loss of passing trade. In its submission, the Chamber Alliance placed considerable emphasis on the need for investment in active and public transport over road. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to debate the merits and demerits of both perspectives, the following independent observation is salient in respect of place-making. *‘The opposition to the bypass is rooted in the Milltown community’s desire to have a say in*

their town's future and by their shared love of their unique built heritage. These are powerful desires and they have been harnessed to create a concrete, actionable vision of a Milltown which is less car dependent' (Kearns, 2022, p. 64). In her assessment of the community planning process and its potential mainstreaming, (Kearns, 2022) notes the importance of good facilitation, access to community development officers, and inclusive actions.

3.1.4 Case Study Implications for Practitioners of Rural Development

Milltown's experiences in promoting rural community resilience reveal that the trajectory has not been linear; it has been characterised by ups and downs, and while concerted efforts have been made over the past decade, further development work needs to be done. Over the past ten years, resilience has been advanced by data collection and animation promoted by South Kerry Development Partnership and by the local authority's dialogue with the Milltown Community and Chamber Alliance. At the same time, however, it has been delimited by pre-existing poor planning that had emphasised the provision of housing over the creation of liveable communities. Moreover, the case study points to the need for ongoing human resource supports, so that voluntary bodies are empowered, and citizens are animated. The case study also underscores the need for capacity-building among institutional actors, so they can engage effectively with civil society and promote more partnership-oriented approaches to place-making and fostering resilience.

3.2 Case Study in the United Kingdom—Market Town of Wooler, County Northumberland

The case study of the market town of Wooler was conducted in the context of the doctoral studies in geography mentioned in the previous section. Wooler, as a rural peripheral settlement and community of about 2,000 inhabitants in the north of England, was compared with two communities of similar size and characteristics elsewhere in Europe.

3.2.1 Context of the Fieldwork and Research

The author conducted on-site fieldwork from March to May of 2018 carrying out a mixed-methods empirical study of Wooler's resilience utilising four different interwoven scientific instruments. Firstly, continuous participatory observation was carried out, under the aegis of a well-known rural and local development organisation, during the ten weeks of fieldwork. Secondly, in order to collect quantitative data in respect of the dynamics identified in the aforementioned conceptual framework

for resilience, surveys were distributed to local population. The survey questionnaire applied a strictly deductive approach, and the findings inform the ‘Resilience Profile’ portrayed in Table 2. Thirdly, a total of twenty-one semi-structured interviews with experts were conducted as inductive components of the research and to obtain information about the characteristics and contextual conditions of the village and rural community. The fourth and final component of the empirical study was a talk and participatory workshop, where the preliminary results of the survey were presented and discussed with all interested residents. This research was carried out between June 2016 and December 2020. It was financed by the Federal State of Lower Saxony and the Volkswagen Foundation in the Federal Republic of Germany.

3.2.2 Introduction and General Description of Wooler

Wooler is a bustling rural market town of around 2,000 inhabitants in the northernmost English county of Northumberland, close to the Scottish border. The sparse population density of 8.7 persons/km² in the Wooler ward (4349 inhabitants in 2021), well-preserved traditional buildings, land-use and landscape give the locality an unmistakably agrarian-rural character (Fig. 4). Wooler’s surrounding landscape and natural environment make the area attractive for tourists visiting, for instance, the Northumberland National Park and the nearby Coastal Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The UK Government defines the area surrounding Wooler as ‘*hamlets and isolated dwellings in a sparse setting*’ and Wooler itself as a ‘*rural town and fringe in a sparse setting*’ (Rural Statistics, 2022).

Due to its distance from the nearest medium-sized centres of Alnwick and Berwick-upon-Tweed, the town functions as a central place and offers a range of public services and local supplies and amenities, particularly on the Wooler High Street. According to the most recent census of population, Wooler has a noticeably ageing population with 40.5% of its citizens being over 65 years. The overall population has remained stable, however, due to a steady influx of incomers (Office for National Statistics, 2021). Employment figures reveal a typical rural economy with low unemployment rates (4.3%) and a considerable number of people employed in agriculture, forestry, and fishing (4.9%) as well as in accommodation and food service activities (12.7%). A fifth of the working population is employed in wholesale and retail trade (20.5%)—the largest proportion in any economic sector (Northumberland County Council, 2011).

Northumberland, as a whole, and especially its most rural and peripheral parts have experienced strong demographic, economic, and structural changes since the 1980s, leading, among other challenges, to shortcomings in the provision of basic rural services and infrastructure. At the beginning of the 1990s, Wooler’s main lifeline, the Wooler High Street, showed symptoms of exhaustion—exhibited by shop and venue vacancy and a conspicuous unemptiness. Therefore, local associations and churches looked for ways to concentrate several unprofitable and scattered community spaces into one multifunctional property and to refurbish the shopping promenade. As a result of an initial village appraisal in 1995, several churches, clubs, associations,

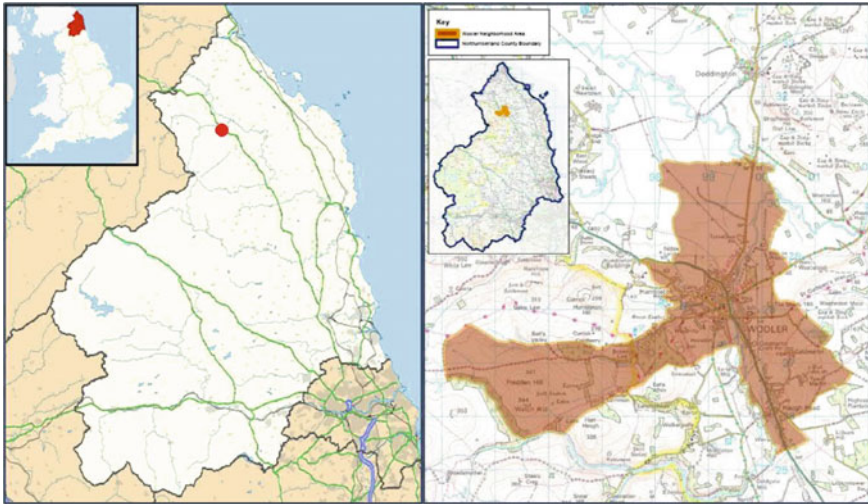


Fig. 4 Location of the case study site Wooler (County of Northumberland, England, United Kingdom). *Source* Own representation modified on the basis of (left) Nilfanion—Wikimedia Commons, (2010), made available under licence agreement CC BY-SA 3.0 and (right) Northumberland County Council illustrated in: WNP Steering Group (2019, p. 6)

and the parish council decided to establish the Glendale Gateway Trust (GGT), which has since become one of the most successful rural community enterprises of its kind in England. This small-scale not-for-profit local development agency aimed to be an expression of the collective will for positive change in Wooler, striking a delicate balance between being a democratic governance platform and delivering projects for community profit as social enterprise.

A key element of Wooler’s resilience is the Cheviot Centre, which has been run commercially by the GGT, since 2001, as a dynamic meeting and educational community hub. Consequently, and due to other collective activities, there has been a noticeable growth in what residents describe as an inclusive ‘*sense and power of place*’. As a result of continuous capacity-building, mostly enabled by the GGT, the networking capacity and professionalisation of the existing community and voluntary sector have been further developed, thereby creating synergies, collaborations, and opportunities for civil society and for small businesses under the umbrella of the Cheviot Centre.

Thanks to the Trust’s success in securing multiple public and private funds and its prudent financial management—achieved mainly through the rental of residential and commercial properties acquired and developed over many years—the full-time team of the GGT successfully complements the severely limited capacity of Northumbrian local authorities at the parish-level. The collaboration of the county and parish council, together with the ever-increasing institutional capacity built up by the Trust haven’t been free of conflict (Healey, 2023, p. 122). Thus, Wooler’s ability to ensure

recurring collective reflection and facilitated negotiation of conflicts emerges as a key factor for the building of rural community resilience.

3.2.3 Findings on Rural Resilience and Vibrancy

The mixed-methods approach outlined in the previous sections enabled simultaneous deductive and inductive approaches to evaluating Wooler’s resilience. The following table (Table 2) presents a resilience profile of the community, based on the cumulated self-assessment on the parts of 137 respondents, who were then living or had lived in Wooler. This form of representation for the uni- and bi-variate results was developed as a compact operationalisation of all dimensions and indicators of the resilience model and put together as composite score (further methodological explanation in Adam Hernández, 2021, pp. 94–96). A high-point score on an indicator represents a strength of Wooler’s community and denotes high resilience and vice versa.

The results confirm the high scores were awarded to most of the indicators under the dimension ‘*Social relationships and networks*’. Based on the empirical material, a strong and inclusive sense of community can be confirmed as one of Wooler’s strongest characteristics. It is worth highlighting this community feature as a result of a long-term collective construction process leading to a strong ‘*sense of belonging*’ (76 points) and place. Regaining community influence over important meeting and other social spaces such as the village hall (Cheviot Centre), the school or the main shopping street, and exerting collective agency can be alleged as instrumental in this process and is intrinsically related to the high score reached on the indicator ‘*self-efficacy*’ (75 points). Furthermore, the inclusive and cohesive nature of the town, defined by many interviewees as an ‘*active and caring community*’, is confirmed by highly rated indicators like ‘*social support*’ (72 points) and the ‘*diversity of groups, clubs and activities*’ (64 points).

Looking at the lower half of Table 2, it becomes evident that a series of governance and leadership issues are hampering Wooler’s community resilience. The empirical findings confirm that issues such as ‘*communication*’ (61 points) and ‘*conflicts*’ (58 points) are particularly challenging and demanding for progressive development processes and their driving actors. Lastly, the empirical findings confirm a notable and concerning distance between citizens in this rural peripheral locality and regional and/or national politics. The indicator achieving the lowest score was ‘*Role of authorities and administration*’ (51 points) shown in Fig. 5. In Wooler, it could be argued that the vacuum left behind by the retreating state has been filled by an active community and altruism.

Since the empirical data were collected (2018), Wooler’s community has been able to articulate quick and inclusive responses during the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent global energy crisis. During the first phase of the pandemic, the Parish Council, in collaboration with the GGT, installed a food bank in the Cheviot Centre. In order to counteract isolation, following the lifting of strict social-distancing regulations, the Wooler Community Food Garden has boosted its membership and activities and focused on community and relationship building. During the energy crisis, the Wooler

Table 2 Resilience profile produced for Wooler as a cumulated self-assessment of the survey respondents

Result	Dimension	Indicator	^a Points
Highest score	Social relationships and networks	Bonding capital	81
↑↑	Social relationships and networks	Sense of belonging	76
	Social relationships and networks	Trust	76
	Attitudes, values and beliefs	Self-efficacy	75
	Attitudes, values and beliefs	Social support	72
	Balance between people, environment and the economy	Environmental well-being	70
	Social relationships and networks	Bridging capital	69
	Social relationships and networks	Reciprocity	69
	Diversity and integration	Diversity of nature and the environment	68
↑	Learning and self-reflection	Learning culture	67
	Attitudes, values and beliefs	Goal orientation	67
	Learning and self-reflection	Self-reflection	66
	Attitudes, values and beliefs	Optimism	66
	Diversity and integration	Diversity of groups, clubs and activities	64
	Key people and leadership	Vision	64
	Social relationships and networks	Active social participation	63
	Key people and leadership	Enabling	63
↓	Key people and leadership	Initiation	62
	Diversity and integration	Diversity of people	62
	Learning and self-reflection	Knowledge and skills	62
	Community action and decision-making	Communication	61
	Basic public services and infrastructure	^a Total score	61
	Balance between people, environment and the economy	Economic well-being	60
	Social relationships and networks	Identity	59
	Key people and leadership	Facilitation	58

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Result	Dimension	Indicator	^a Points
↓↓	Learning and self-reflection	Willingness to experiment	58
	Community action and decision-making	Conflicts	58
	Key people and leadership	Diversity	58
	Social relationships and networks	Linking capital	57
	Attitudes, values and beliefs	Positive experiences	57
	Balance between people, environment and the economy	Social well-being	56
	Community action and decision-making	Processes	56
	Diversity and integration	Diversity of the local economy	52
Lowest score	Community action and decision-making	Role of authorities and administration	51

^a For the dimension ‘services of general interest and infrastructure’, a total score was determined to set this overall as one single indicator in relation to the other indicators of the resilience profile. *Source* own representation translated from Adam Hernández (2021, p. 177)

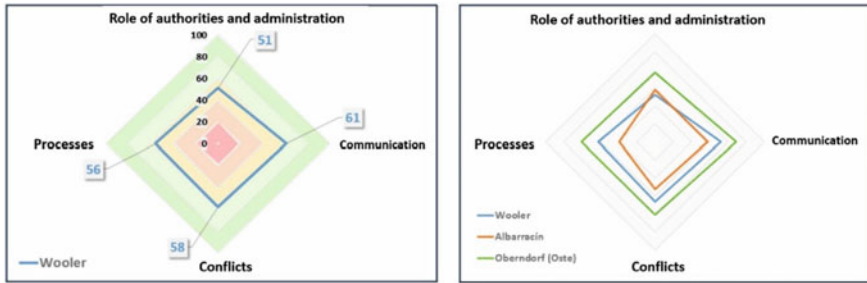


Fig. 5 Self-assessment of the indicators of resilience in the dimension community action and decision-making in Wooler (left) and comparison to the other villages/towns evaluated (right). *Source* Own representation translated from Adam Hernández (2021, p. 174)

Warm Hub, established by the United Reform Church, has experienced a growth in activity and become part of a network of over thirty-five Northumbrian warm hubs. In March 2023, *The Times* newspaper described Wooler as one of the best places in which to live in the United Kingdom (Goss, 2023).

3.2.4 Case Study Implications for Practitioners of Rural Development

Wooler has an impressive history of self-organisation and collective resource mobilisation leading to higher resilience, which becomes visible, *inter alia*, through its diverse voluntary and community sector and especially through its most effective collective vehicle to shape change namely the Glendale Gateway Trust. Moreover, and against the background of the difficult coexistence of the trust and the parish council, questions emerge in respect of local governance. These oblige practitioners to focus on, and confront, the legitimacy of development pathways and initiatives: Who is entitled to initiate and steer community developments in the locality? How should community development be democratically organised? These questions need to be systematically asked and considered. In addition, communication about common matters in the community needs to be effective, continuous and contribute to more transparency. Additionally, differences of opinion need to be recognised as a resource, instead of a hindrance, to nurture dialogue openness and respect, which emerges as integral to building community resilience. Finally, legitimacy should emerge from the composition and organisational design of trusts or whichever other organisation enables collective agency including committees and advisory boards, working and consultation methodologies, membership, decision-making processes and good governance.

3.3 Discussion of the Case Studies

Our two case study communities have had different development trajectories; Milltown has experienced considerable population growth, while Wooler's population has been fairly stagnant. Yet, both communities have been affected by rural restructuring and the declining significance of agriculture in the rural economy. They have also been affected by urban-generated in-migration. In Milltown's case, most of the incomers are young families, who have been attracted by the relative affordability of housing and proximity to employment. In Wooler's case, most of the incomers are retirees, who are attracted to a rural environment and quality of life. Wooler's landscapes and heritage are among the place-based assets that attract people to the community and underpin local economic development, thereby contributing to resilience. In Milltown, however, residents have been slower to valorise natural and cultural resources, and their embrace of the locality's historical landscape emerged, to a large extent, from citizens' adverse reactions to the proposed construction of a bypass road, rather than from any endogenous factors. Thus, the valorisation of natural and heritage resources may yet represent a potential contribution to resilience in Milltown.

Both Milltown and Wooler have been affected by a hollowing-out of their town/village cores, and in Milltown, suburbanisation and sprawl have become problematic. Over the past six years, the community and the county council's commitment to research have engendered structured conversations about Milltown's future and fostered a meeting of minds on several issues. Yet, it is evident that further work is

required to ensure place-making principles are integral to the forthcoming formulation of a master plan for Milltown.³ In Wooler, dereliction and vacancy were among the catalysts that led to the formation of the Glendale Gateway Trust, and a clear desire to avoid the economic decline that was evident in the 1990s has been a factor in shaping the Trust’s agenda. Thus, Wooler has exhibited an ability to ‘bounce-back’. Moreover, Wooler’s greater distance from other towns is among the factors that help to sustain the economic resilience of its high street. Meanwhile, Milltown needs to develop strategic objectives that prevent it from becoming a dormitory town, so it harnesses the economic capital of its commuter population and sustains its agriculture-related economic activities and services (cattle mart, vet, garages, tool shop and other retailers) in enabling it to be resilient in the face of its changing economic landscape.

Citizen engagement and communities’ abilities to organise themselves and lead development emerge as significant factors in both locations. The Glendale Gateway Trust and Milltown Community and Chamber Alliance, both of which are voluntary organisations, are serving as vehicles for citizen engagement and stakeholder participation in local decision-making. The Trust’s longer-standing experience in collective organisation and its financial clout has given it notable leverage in its advocacy work and in its dealings with external agencies. Both case studies illustrate the importance of partnership-oriented approaches to place-making.

Leverage and leadership capacity, as evidenced in Wooler, are associated with socio-cultural resilience—leading to positive self-assessments of local social capital. Wooler’s resilience, in these regards, is associated with the Glendale Gateway Trust’s systematic investments in capacity-building and the community’s access to support staff, including those of the Cheviot Centre. Milltown’s place-making processes benefited from parallel awareness-raising and capacity-building and access to facilitators with expertise in community development and planning. Thus, the case study experiences support the contention that *‘irrespective of location, the importance of the medium to long-term nature of the resilience-building and explanatory processes should be emphasised. The gradual development and the continuity (especially in terms of staff in key organisations and committed people in the rural community) of initiatives, projects and organisations in the field appear to be crucial.’* (Adam Hernández, 2021, p. 370).

While government and EU policy documents laud volunteers and civic leaders, volunteerism is fragile, and voluntary groups cannot function without some access to professional, human resource supports, training, animation, capacity-building and structured networking. The COVID-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions on community gatherings, in Ireland more than in the UK, have debilitated civil society organisations, and many community-based activities that were ‘suspended’ in early 2020, have not yet resumed and many are unlikely ever to resume.

In Wooler, the ‘role of authorities and administration’ emerges as the most significant challenge to resilience; it receives the lowest score on the community’s self-assessment matrix. This finding is similar to that found in the South Kerry study

³ The Irish Government has approved funding for a town master plan.

(O’Keeffe, 2015). While both jurisdictions have very different political systems, their respective local authorities have fewer powers and operate over much larger and more populous areas than is the case in almost all of rural Europe. In Wooler, the Glendale Gateway Trust has managed to mitigate some of the shortcomings associated with the local government system in the UK, but it is evident that structural weaknesses persist in sub-regional governance in Ireland, resulting in a hampering of partnership and lower institutional resilience. These challenges are evidenced, *inter alia*, by the once-off, rather than mainstreamed, investment in the personnel and expertise required to nurture and sustain participatory place-making.

Both case studies bear out the words of Douglas (2017, p. 21) that ‘*rural community resilience is quintessentially about power, and issues of choice and control*’. As evidenced in both communities, bridging and linking capital are determinants of rural community resilience. Wooler’s resilience has been nurtured and sustained by excellent relationships between local civil society and bodies such as Northumberland County Council, the LEADER Local Action Group and several charities and benevolent societies that provide funding and capacity-building, and generally enable development at the local level. In Milltown, Kerry County Council’s funding of a participatory planning process along with dialogue between officials and community leaders is leading to a greater appreciation of local assets and consensus in respect of the importance of facilitating access to green spaces, and the provision, albeit retrospectively, of community infrastructure. In both cases, LEADER has been an important driver of resilience, and in Milltown, it has been the primary source of funds for the development of social and recreational amenities. Thus, both Wooler and Milltown illustrate the importance of statutory bodies playing an enabling role and providing guidance; partnership-working and shared responsibilities are key to building resilience. These observations tally with those of Glass et al (2022), based on research in Scotland.

4 Conclusion

As rural places continue to change, vibrancy and resilience will continue to be contested, dynamic and somewhat nebulous concepts. This chapter contributes to reducing their fuzziness, and it suggests ways in which rural community resilience can be captured, measured, assessed and influenced. As resilience is a wide-ranging concept and is strongly shaped by place, the authors caution against any singular metric or methodology for measuring resilience. Thus, self-assessment tools should strive to be multi-dimensional and to capture innate, acquired and evolving features of place and the processes that shape place. Moreover, rural community resilience should be understood and assessed with reference to governance dynamics, including the community’s capacity to exercise agency, undertake reflection and harness endogenous and exogenous knowledge capital.

The two case studies presented here and the application, in other contexts (Adam Hernández, 2021), of the rural community resilience framework applied in Wooler

provide pointers that ought to be useful for rural development actors in understanding, assessing and fostering resilience. These pointers centre on the tri-perspective framework presented in Sect. 2.2.1.

1. Perspective—A Rural Community with Vibrant Relationships

As the case studies illustrate, the emergence and nurturing of bottom-up development processes has enabled strong **social relationships and networks** among citizens and their forms of organisation—in Milltown in respect of community planning and in Wooler in respect of local economic development and town centre revitalisation. These case studies, among many others, underscore the importance of ongoing training, animation, capacity-building and access to professional human resources. Furthermore, **values, attitudes and beliefs** like communities’ openness to change and experimentation and their ability to be agile and responsive, in the face of new and emerging challenges and opportunities, are conducive to resilience. Furthermore, communities’ abilities to be **inclusive** and to harness newcomers’ social capital are barometers of their resilience capacity. The inclusion of **diverse** voices and perspectives in local decision-making enables communities to increase social resilience, although the development of inclusive structures and the promotion of partnership with statutory bodies can be time-consuming.

2. Perspective: A Rural Community with Effective Actors, Structures and Processes

The two case studies elaborated in this chapter also highlight the decisive role of **key people, key organisations and their leadership** capacity. These roles were assumed by Milltown Community and Chamber Alliance and the Glendale Gateway Trust. In both cases, leadership emerged from the bottom-up, and its effectiveness was shaped by the capacity of key individuals, local legitimacy and their interfaces with and leverages from external bodies. As the preceding dimensions have noted, **community action and decision-making** are integral to the promotion of resilience. Good governance implies having effective local structures—platforms for citizen engagement, action and advocacy, and these require significant and continuous investment in capacity-building.

3. Perspective: A Rural Community Capable of Developing Sustainable Solutions

The dimensions of **Learning and self-reflection** as well as the **balance between people, environment and economy** come most sharply to the fore when communities need to bounce-back from shocks or setbacks. They require continuous processes of learning and self-reflection. Reflexive communities will be more capable of navigating the complex nature of change and developing future-proof solutions. This needs participation, external support, and collective intelligence along with the willingness to innovate and take calculated risks. Finally, our case studies have identified the public sector’s influence on rural community resilience. The state is a key factor in multi-stakeholder governance, and it should be the primary provider and/or enabler of **service and infrastructure provision**, so that market failures are either averted or minimised and civil society organisations are not overstretched.

This chapter elucidates a need for further research, particularly in respect of the influence of externalities on the medium- and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the resilience of rural communities. While the case studies highlight the merits of action-research methods, they have been bound by such approaches, and by the voluntary nature of people's participation in the research. Thus, more in-depth sociological and ethnographic approaches may be required in order to engage more of the so-called hard-to-reach groups. This research also indicates the merits of, and need for, further inter-territorial benchmarking, so that levels of resilience can be compared and contrasted, preferably on a longitudinal basis.

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Short Food Supply Chains and Rural Development. Notes from the LEADER Approach and the National Strategy for Internal Areas in the Molise Region (Italy)



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Abstract Based on a redefinition of certain types of short food supply chain (SFSC) and a reformulation of the concepts of territorial capital and identity, this chapter reflects on the different effects of SFSCs in terms of economic growth and territorial development. In the case of Molise, a region in the centre-south of Italy, short supply chains have become an integral part of various important policy strategies. However, these strategies tend to prioritize economic growth objectives, such as increasing market share and the competitiveness of farms, while territorial development objectives remain hidden or at least hard to identify. The local implementation of the National Strategy for Internal Areas and the LEADER LAG strategies seem to be aimed at shortening the food supply chain: the main goal is to keep a larger share of the added value in the local area near the farmers, especially those involved in traditional food production, by reducing the number of intermediaries. In the future, these policy strategies should approach SFSCs from a broader perspective that takes into account the effects they can have on regional development.

Keywords Short food supply chain · Territorial capital · Territorial identity · Territorial development · Local Action Groups (LAGs)

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1 Introduction

The increasing interest in products that are “more natural” and “more local” has focused the attention of researchers and policymakers on agri-food chains, and in particular, on their “alternative” and short variants (Evola et al., 2022), which are widely viewed as an effective tool for stimulating economic growth and development in rural areas (Bazzani & Canavari, 2013; Marsden et al., 1999, 2000). As a result, short supply chains have become the main pillar of the recent European “Farm to Fork” strategy (EC—European Commission, 2020).

In truth, short supply chains are just one of a wide range of alternative systems, usually referred to as Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) (Renting et al., 2003). Some AFNs, which adopt radically “alternative” approaches in terms of their business practices, have originated in movements that sought to combat the globalization of the food market. However, over time, the ideological component has gradually disappeared, while the spectrum of issues that inspire AFNs has broadened to include sustainability (Mastronardi et al., 2019), food safety, food quality, cultural values, etc. (Dansero & Puttilli, 2014). More and more frequently, AFNs today are made up of actors that follow traditional business practices, treat food like any other product and approach their businesses in much the same way as other “more conventional” businesspeople (Rosol, 2020). However, this is combined with a marked tendency towards the territorialization of processes (Berti, 2020), and while conventional systems (CS) are characterized “by strong economies of scale, industrialized food production and processing methods and large-scale distribution, [AFNs...] are based on short, localized food networks, such as farmer’s markets, direct farm sales, informal consumer groups, community gardens, vegetable box schemes, etc.” (Randelli et al., 2017).

Short food supply chains (SFSCs) and AFNs in general are spreading quickly but unevenly, in that innovations of this kind seem to have taken hold above all in peri-urban areas (Marino, 2016; Randelli et al., 2017), with significant differences arising between different rural contexts. Furthermore, although CS and AFNs compete with each other to some extent, they should not be regarded as entirely antagonistic. On the contrary, in many cases they complement each other (Randelli et al., 2017) and sometimes even overlap or merge (Thomé et al., 2021). Thus, for example, the success of some short supply chains has sparked the interest of both multinationals and large-scale retailers, who have reacted with aggressive imitative and co-optative strategies. At the same time, the proliferation of new regulations and new regional brands has paradoxically driven short supply chains to adopt the same neoliberal techniques on whose rejection many of them built their reputation and economic success (Belliggiano & De Rubertis, 2016). According to Rosol (2020), “What makes food or food systems alternative has been debated for some time [...]. An important intervention by economic geographers, Watts, Ilbery, and Maye [...] distinguishes between alterity based on the kind of products offered, and alterity based on different distribution systems. I argue, that in the face of the growing interest of the world’s largest food and beverage manufacturing companies (i.e., Big Food) in alternative

food, this distinction is now insufficient, and new ways of discussing alterity are needed (Rosol, 2020, p. 53)".

While AFNs form a broad category with a wide range of initiatives, SFSCs are generally considered a predominantly sustainable practice (Mastronardi et al., 2015). The definitions of SFSCs found in the literature generally coincide in referring to them as an organizational method that connects production and consumption with the minimum possible number of intermediaries (Kumar et al., 2019, p. 728). "The concept is more specific than AFNs, and, rather, covers (the interrelations between) actors who are directly involved in the production, processing, distribution, and consumption of new food products" (Renting et al., 2003, p. 394).

The length of a (short) supply chain can be measured in terms of the physical distance between consumer and producer, as occurs with "proximate", "local" (Aubry & Chiffolleau, 2009, p. 56) or "zero miles" short supply chains, which have low environmental impact. Strong emphasis is placed on the local origin of the food (Carbone, 2018) and the benefits this provides for small producers and in terms of cultural enhancement (Corsi et al., 2018), although the possible definitions of "local food" could be the subject of detailed discussion (Eriksen, 2013). The length of a supply chain can also be measured by the number of intermediaries between the producer and the consumer or according to the direction of movement ("farmer to consumer, consumer to farmer or convergence towards an intermediate structure") (Aubry & Chiffolleau, 2009, p. 56).

The way in which these supply chains are defined and determined is obviously directly related to the effects that they have on the territory. In the following paragraphs, we will highlight how different evaluations can be reached depending on whether our approach is based purely in terms of economic growth or whether territorial development is also taken into account and how the effects of the former are not always as obvious as one might think. In part 2, short supply chains will be presented as a constituent element of territorial capital, and as both a cause and an effect of typicality, which is capable of producing wealth and of boosting territorial development. Transversally, we propose new original interpretations of the concepts of territorial capital and identity, which are pivotal to the interpretation of the role and values of the agri-food chains. The latter are analyzed and typified in part 3, while the role they are assumed to play in development processes is explored in greater depth in part 4. The proposed theoretical framework is then applied to the case of Molise (part 5), a small region in southern Italy, for which we analyze the types of supply chain used by local dairy producers and the effects and interferences generated locally by the rural development strategies of the LEADER programme and the National Strategy for Internal Areas (SNAI). Part 6 contains some final considerations and conclusions.

2 Short Food Supply Chains, Territorial Identity and Development

Traditional foods, which are generally considered to have an array of properties capable of increasing overall sustainability, also play a vital role in rural development. These include the dynamic effect on the local agri-food economy caused by the increase in internal demand; the reduction of the ecological footprint associated with the use of local raw materials and products and the increased appeal of the area for tourists. The success of SFSCs is linked, on the demand side, to a lack of confidence amongst consumers in the quality of foods whose origin is not clearly specified on the label or whose brand is unrecognizable, while on the supply side, their success is associated with the opportunities they provide for reducing competition, focusing on the most effective differentiator ever created: the uniqueness of the product, which arises from the unique (and by extension non-fungible and inimitable) characteristics of the place where the product is made, which enable it to be produced there (Corsi et al., 2018). Short food supply chains are particularly good at promoting and enhancing old and new typicality (Belliggiano & De Rubertis, 2012, 2016). They are the result of the enhancement of consolidated relationships, knowledge and practices. In other words, SFSCs increase territorial capital, to the extent that they allow local actors to discover new endogenous resources or adapt the way they are used in order to boost local wealth-producing capacity. While they seem able to stem the progressive erosion of agricultural incomes (squeeze), these chains “re-socialize” and “re-spatialize” food consumption (Marsden et al., 2000; Van der Ploeg et al., 2000), offering consumers products characterized by particular local socio-ecological attributes (Renting et al., 2003) at higher prices (Dupuis & Goodman, 2005).

It is now widely accepted that the increasingly central role played by the design of production chains in the theory and practice of rural development depends on their ability to (re-)design new relationships both between producers and consumers and between agriculture, rurality and society. This has important consequences for the organization of space and the policies that seek to regulate it. These new relationships take the form of specific sales and production methods, aimed above all at establishing a closer, more immediate relationship with the consumer. They also seek to provide a better, more effective structure for the various producer–customer interfaces, influencing rural development processes in both a technical–organizational (companies) and a social (other actors) sense (Marsden et al., 2000).

Proximity relationships are enhanced by repeated encounters between producer and consumer, by relational thickenings that lead to the sharing of objectives and tools. There is therefore a reciprocal effect in which the particular context makes the SFSCs special and vice versa.

SFSCs are part of territorial capital (TC) and contribute to both its “generative” and “sedimented” components (De Rubertis et al., 2018, 2019). In their intangible dimension, SFSCs should be regarded as generative components, in that they produce, reproduce and consolidate relationships of trust and local skills in ways that increase

both human and social capital. Human and social capital which, by significantly influencing individual and collective actions, produce tangible and intangible effects in the form of structures, infrastructures, artistic expression, cultural heritage, government bodies, production systems, amongst which we should also include the technical and material dimensions of SFSCs and their typicality, which, in a process of paradoxical circularity, are also part of the sedimented component of TC.

Given their origins, most SFSCs should be viewed as elements of TC that are implicitly recognized as such by the reference community: they are products and processes linked to environmental or historical-cultural specificities (typicality) that the community has evidently, perhaps unconsciously, preserved. The typicality of SFSCs, as we will later go on to explain, tends to be stronger the shorter the distance (physical, functional and sometimes cultural) between producer and consumer; however, they must necessarily be considered as typical, in the sense that each one is based on a localized, non-replicable system of relationships (trust) and values (economic and non-economic). Sometimes, the policies aimed at promoting these chains, in the form of official recognition by third parties (government/certifying bodies and connected area brands, certifications of origin, etc.), can have significant effects on their structure and purpose, making them less clearly rooted in the local area.

In fact, like any other component of the TC, the typical features, the result of long, gradual processes of sedimentation of knowledge and practices linked to local values and even long-term objectives of the local community, are not only a product but also an expression of the way of life of the community. Local typicalities are attributable to actions and projects that tend to coincide with the general will, with the territorial development objectives shared by the community. These actions and projects do not necessarily have to be of a conservative nature: casting aside or radically altering traditional practices may be necessary to achieve a more widely appreciated development path. In this sense, typical features should be viewed as contributing to the local identity profile, as representing one of the many organizational solutions that a community selects and applies to achieve its development objectives (De Rubertis, 2013). Even when “constructed” through improvised initiatives by individuals, or when exclusively aimed at achieving economic goals, new recognition or enhancement measures can become pioneering initiatives, and new practices that in time could also be applied by other actors. This would give rise to social innovations (Moulaert, 2016; Neumeier, 2012, 2017) which, by making shared objectives (identity consolidation) easier to achieve or by proposing new ones (identity transformations), would impact on territorial development paths (De Rubertis et al., 2018).

In other words, SFSCs increase territorial capital, to the extent that they allow local actors to discover new endogenous resources or new ways of using them, in order to improve local capacity to produce wealth, even if this feeds through into the construction, consolidation or creation of conventional production and distribution systems. The problem is not the type of organization that they decide to apply, but the reasons behind this decision and the awareness of it. In short, our intention here is not in any way to extol the virtues of the short supply chain compared to conventional

systems, but simply to observe that while in the case of SFSCs, the mechanisms for the selection and transformation of practices tend to spontaneously adapt to local development dynamics, and in the case of potentially more impactful organizational choices, such as opting for conventional systems, careful monitoring and regulation will be necessary so as to ensure that business choices are consistent with local expectations. Furthermore, in some cases, as will be illustrated in the following sections, the boundaries between the different types of SFSCs become very blurred.

3 Types of Short Food Supply Chains

As Renting et al. (2003) made clear, the “distant” consumer only trusts well-known brands which, moreover, increasingly associate their image with the places that guarantee the quality of the processes, rather than with the quality of the processes themselves. The “nearby” consumer is involved in “other” forms of communication than those of the brand and, once again, tends to reward the local producer. The configuration of short supply chains is therefore derived from the combination of two components: namely, the type of organization of the supply chain and the clear definition of specific quality conventions (Renting et al., 2003, p. 399).

“[...] With a SFSC, it is not the number of times a product is handled or the distance over which it is ultimately transported which is necessarily critical, but the fact that the product reaches the consumer embedded with information, for example printed on packaging or communicated personally at the point of retail. [...] The three main types of SFSC we identify are:

Face-to-face: the consumer purchases a product direct from the producer/processor on a face-to-face basis. Authenticity and trust are mediated through personal interaction. The Internet also now presents opportunities for a variant of face-to-face contact through on-line trading and web pages;

Spatial proximity: products are produced and retailed in the specific region (or place) of production, and consumers are made aware of the ‘local’ nature of the product at the point of retail;

Spatially extended: where value- and meaning-laden information about the place of production and those producing the food is translated to consumers who are outside of the region of production itself and who may have no personal experience of that region” (Marsden et al., 2000, p. 425).

The three categories simplify and outline the enormous variety of possible combinations that can be observed in the relationship between producers and consumers.

The face-to-face (F) type of SFSC presupposes a particularly simple, vertical form of organization, in which the relationship of trust between consumer and producer is progressively constructed and directed by the former’s experience of the product and its particular characteristics, and of the processes and behaviour of the actors involved, with the support of the latter. This model, in addition to including the

most common types of direct sales (farmers' market, farm shop, roadside sales, pick your own, food miles), also includes joint-purchasing groups (Albanese & Penco, 2010; Brunori et al., 2011) and box schemes (Viganò et al., 2012). An obvious example of a face-to-face scheme is agritourism (or farm tourism in general), a way of supplementing agricultural income by enhancing local agri-food chains.

The proximate (P) category presupposes, by contrast, a more complex institutional organization, such as, for example, the various forms of cooperation between producers, aimed at the reciprocal enlargement of the selection of goods on sale at their farm shops with products not available at their farms, or, the establishment of geographical quality brands that represent the territory at different scales (region, province, park, LAG, municipal unions, municipalities, etc.). However, these are relations of proximity, in the sense that the transactions usually take place within the same context in which the products are made, while the interaction with the producers can take place through intermediate actors such as local shops or restaurants, who often act as guarantors of the authenticity of the products.

The third category, extended (E) short supply chains, includes cases in which the increase in the distance between producer and consumer does not lead to a substantial uprooting of the short supply chain, as this distance is generally proportional to the success and popularity achieved by the products (e.g. champagne and Parmesan Cheese). In this particular instance, risks could arise from strategies and policies that encourage the actors involved to take a more flexible approach, adapting their products in line with demand. In so doing, they could irreversibly damage the value accruing to the product from its embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985; Murdoch et al., 2000; Winter, 2003). By connecting "distant" actors, extended supply chains appear as long networks that can produce identity transformation or consolidation effects, according to the way they are constructed and the function they perform.

However, there are certain cases in which extended supply chains can usefully be divided into "relatively extended" (ERE) and "absolutely short" (EAS) extended supply chains.

In ERE supply chains (Fig. 1), consumption takes place a long way from the place of production and there is no direct contact with the producer. The supply chains promote exports, sometimes quite substantial ones, of products that evoke or reflect to some extent local specialties and which often have a strong impact on the economy of the supply chain and of the entire territory. The further the consumer is from the producer, the more difficult it is to establish relationships of trust based on reputational capital. The latter rarely has the right characteristics to be "naturally" recognizable outside the local context (i.e. the one in which routine social practices are performed) and, at long distances, even the reputational externalities generated by the place in which the actor is based may be lost. The deficit in terms of trust and recognition is normally filled by investing in advertising, which makes the product or territory brand "well-known" (obviously, a substantial amount of capital is required to achieve this) (Higgins et al., 2008). Even if the product travels great distances, if when it reaches the consumer, it is accompanied by sufficient information (labels, brands, publicity in general) to allow it to be "associated with the place/space of production" (Renting et al., 2003), and the supply chain will still be considered short. Of course,

the producer must take great care to promote the product effectively, to try to make it attractive using the “cultural keys” of the target market (language, expectations, style of life and consumption). Inevitably (perhaps even unconsciously), the need for successful communication can have knock-on effects on the product, on the processes and on the local actors themselves. This could result in the contamination of the local representations (in the production region) of the territorial capital, of its identity and development path. The changes this brings are not necessarily bad in themselves, but must be consistent with the expectations and aspirations of the community.

In EAS, consumption takes place on the spot, regardless of where the consumer comes from. Direct contact with producers is founded and consolidated on the basis of trust and reputational mechanisms that encourage relationships with residents, day-trippers and tourists. In these cases, the promotion and advertising requirements are usually less urgent or even non-existent; the market therefore has a milder impact on the products, processes and producers and by extension on territorial identities and development paths. Even so, a lack of change is not necessarily a good in itself (Table 1).

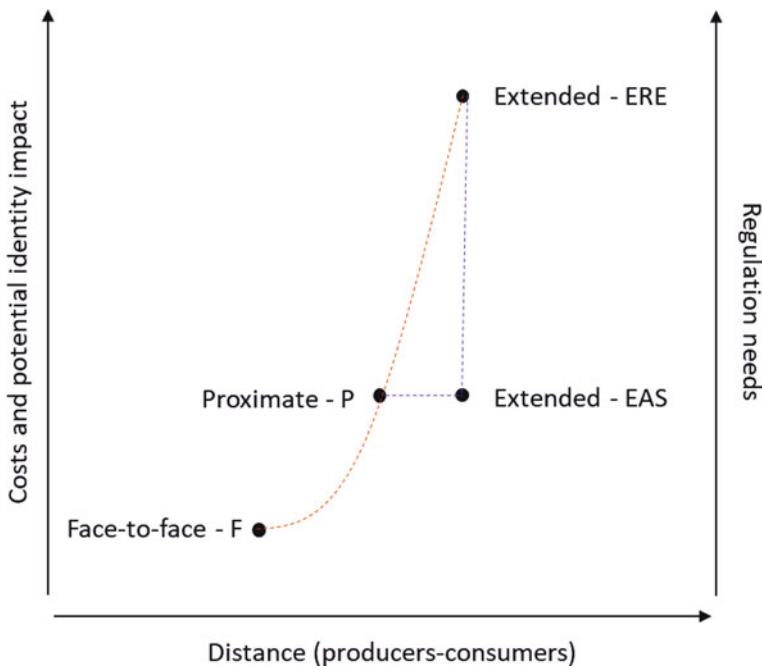


Fig. 1 Types of SFSCs. As the distance between the actors increases, the possibility of increasing the reputational capital of the producer decreases, while the costs necessary to compensate for tarnishing its reputation increase. The increase in costs is also associated with a greater impact on identity. This is one of the characteristics that make short supply chains interesting for both growth and development approaches. *Source* the authors

Table 1 Extended short supply chains: strategies and identity effects

Extended SFSC	Strategies	Identity effects
ERE Relatively extensive (attracted by the consumer)	Building the reputation of the product with the “cultural keys” of the recipient; inevitable (unconscious?) effects on the product, on the processes and on the local actors themselves	Processes and products are part of local “ways of life”. Possible effects on local organization: 1. Identity consolidation if changes are consistent with development objectives; 2. Identity transformations in other cases
EAS Absolutely short (attractive to the consumer)	No active promotion required; the market consists of local and tourist demand	Relatively low impact on processes. Identity stabilization or fewer requests for transformation

Source The authors

Of course, the distinction between ERE and EAS is rarely clear-cut. Similarly to what we witnessed earlier with CS and AFNs in general, in this case too, the current trends show a certain mix of the two types: the EREs are paying more attention to local specificities, offering tastings at the farm, storytelling, and other initiatives specific to other kinds of short supply chain, while the EAS is making more conservative organizational changes (farm hospitality, cultural initiatives) and at the same time expanding the market, borrowing methods typical of the EREs.

4 Economic Growth and Rural Development

Of the various typologies presented, Face-to-Face and Proximate are the most protective of local typicality, given that they serve an essentially local demand. Their dissemination is therefore potentially highly compatible with local development goals, themselves the result of bottom-up construction and sharing processes.

The other two types raise less obvious questions in relation to extended SFSCs. Extended short supply chains are the only SFSCs to address wholly or partially non-local demand, while maintaining local roots. They do this through exports (in the case of the EREs) or through tourism (in the case of the EASs). As a result, they seem more linked to economic growth objectives than Face-to-Face and Proximate type chains. In particular, it is worth highlighting the connections between extended supply chains, economic growth and territorial development.

It is generally accepted that typical foods are one of the major attractions of rural tourism and that food tourism is a valuable tool for enhancing local agricultural and food practices (Fusté-Forné & Jamal, 2020).

“Food is considered a key element in designing a tourism product [...], and it is a specific component of a tourism experience [...]. In this context, local food plays an important role in motivating travel [...] and in characterizing tourism destinations [...]. Moreover, the food heritage of a specific area creates both sensorial and sociocultural values. This cocreation involves historical and environmental factors that extend the meaning of local food and increase the value of the area [...]. Food is therefore an important element of tourism in rural areas. It supports the tourism industry by enhancing rural culture and facilitating the integration of rural traditions and the local environment, for example, cheese production [...]. Sometimes, local stakeholders (particularly farmers and tourism operators, as well as local associations and public entities, like parks) support the link between local food and rural tourism. In these cases, collaboration and communication are essential. Local stakeholders can work together and introduce elements of innovation to increase local activities, such as tourism [...], and they can improve profitable collaboration among them [...]” (Duglio et al., 2022, p. 3).

However, the consequences in terms of sustainable development, social and cultural sustainability and, in general, the well-being of the community are underestimated. The resulting demand stimulates both conventional (often supra-local) and alternative supply chains (networks) (especially, local or regional), in various combinations and with different effects on the territory.

The comparison with non-local demand gives new additional meanings and functions to the typicalities, which, as mentioned earlier, in short supply chains are a combination of process and product. The economic objectives sought by promoting the products on “other” markets have consequences for the typicality of the processes and products including:

- (a) typicality is reduced and adapted to standards established outside the area, so adapting local peculiarities to non-local demand;
- (b) typicality is preserved or perhaps increased, in the hope that consumers in the “other” markets will discover and appreciate the particularities of the product on offer.

The possibility referred to in point (a) is based on the assumption that each production system must seek, on the basis of the available resources, its own location, which is valued by the market. The imperative of globalization substantially transforms the local system into a dependent variable of the global system: the qualities of the processes and products must be adapted to the expectations of global consumers, so jeopardizing, in the long run, the survival of locally rooted typicalities. There is no guarantee that something that can be monetized today may also be monetized in the future and something that is not valued today, or perhaps even ignored or despised, is not destined at some stage to be considered precious.

The option referred to in point (b) involves supplying a product that ignores the needs of non-local demand, relying solely on the locally expressed demand that

probably gave rise to it, and perhaps on demand from a cultured, elitist type of tourist who is determined to discover and experiment. It is a type of supply that is difficult to standardize, at least without harming its appeal, and with rather limited growth potential, at least in the short or medium term (Belliggiano & De Rubertis, 2012).

In particular, in the cases of the F, P and EAS supply chains, the main reference market should be based on traditional local demand supplemented by “another” demand, i.e. tourists who select the product for the same reasons as local consumers. The reputational externalities that might result from this approach could also have important activation and promotion effects on the other type of supply chain (ERE), which could assume much more central roles. Demand from tourists, which is expected to complement regional demand, would allow these kinds of supply chain (F, P and EAS) to expand their reference market without renouncing their strong local roots and would bring benefits in terms of product recognition and in terms of the methods for redistributing added value (mainly within the region). In short, there is a unique convergence between the economic goals of short supply chains and the functional objectives of rural tourism, which is becoming increasingly experiential. As is well known, experiential tourism is characterized by the active role of the tourists, who discover the local qualities and, in general, adapt to them, so minimizing the inevitable influence on their identity. Of course, from time to time, it is necessary to assess the maximum levels, in terms of total load capacity, beyond which tourist demand would no longer be compatible with objectives of this kind. Short supply chains are difficult to preserve in situations in which tourist demand is disproportionately large compared to local demand. The pressure from tourism generates leakage effects and an ecological and social impact on the territory that short supply chains can only partially mitigate (Mtapuri et al., 2021).

In this case, exceeding these thresholds would not necessarily be a bad thing in itself, but it would have to be compatible with locally shared development objectives, which could give rise to new additional needs for monitoring and regulation.

5 The Case of Molise

Molise is a region in the centre-south of Italy with a population of just under 300,000 people, for whom agri-food (and therefore agriculture) is of great importance in cultural and economic terms, despite the fact that it has suffered a slight decline in added value in recent years. The main reductions have been in cereal production, which had grown rapidly in the years prior to the pandemic, and is still very important due to its ability to reach foreign markets (Banca d'Italia, 2022).

In 2019, the agri-food sector achieved figures that were double the national average in terms of its regional share of added value (8%) and employment (11%). The average size of the production units is lower than the national average: in the agro-industry, 590 local units employed less than five workers on average. While in agriculture, the region's staple product is cereals, in agro-industry the main specialization is in the dairy sector, which employs over a quarter of all the workers in this sector, three

times the corresponding national percentage, although the region's dairy businesses are smaller than the national average (Banca d'Italia, 2022). In 2020, of the 63 agro-industry businesses registered in this region, most were limited companies (41) and the others sole proprietorships (22). Just over half the businesses (39) were located in the province of Campobasso, the regional capital (Istat, 2020), and the rest (24) were in the province of Isernia.

This explains why the economic potential of agri-food resources is emphasized in almost all the rural development programme documents for Molise. The aim is to direct their efforts towards integrated forms of development, connected above all with the growth of experiential rural/cultural tourism, linked to alternative food networks. The establishment and/or consolidation of links between local companies operating in different fields, such as agriculture, crafts and tourism, create underlying forms of food distribution associated with short supply chains, which by connecting producers and consumers—sometimes even at great distances, can attend to purchase reasons that go beyond just demand for good food. As will be observed in the examples set out below, the ways in which companies achieve this result can be attributed both to the types of supply chain illustrated above and to their hybrid forms, thus demonstrating that even a peripheral, depopulated region with poor infrastructures such as Molise (De Rubertis & Belliggiano, in press) is paradoxically able to find, thanks to short supply chains, new opportunities to connect to markets much wider than the strictly local ones.

Like many other territories in the central-southern Apennines, Molise shows signs, in its economic and social organization, of the legacy of ancient pastoral practices, which in most cases have developed into more or less intensive forms of livestock farming. These constitute the first stage in more or less articulated, complex dairy supply chains, which explain the importance of this sector, as revealed by statistics from the Banco di Italia.

This specialization arises from the strong connections between the ecological context and local agricultural and craft activities, which have established themselves over time and spread the corresponding know-how. These are communities of practices (Wenger, 2009) relating to the management of pastures for rearing livestock (first sheep and then cattle), dairy processing, customs surrounding the collection and delivery of the milk, purchasing and consumption habits of local communities. Practices that have remained unchanged over time and on which the uniqueness of some local products would seem to depend. This is the case for example of *caciocavallo*, a cheese whose name and shape are increasingly closely associated with the image of these territories, as evidenced, for example, by the name and logo of a football team (*Calciocavallo*) founded by Molise immigrants in Northern Italy, and by a small ceramic piggy bank with a similar name (*Caciocavanaugh*) and shape as the cheese, which was created by a local artist to express her commitment to the territorial regeneration of the most problematic rural areas.

The relationships underlying these socioeconomic structures have been laid down and refined over time on the basis of development objectives shared by the local communities, which, as they are based on the same values, have shaped the behaviour of the main economic stakeholders over time, so favouring the creation of restricted,

typically local markets. The density of the relationships between them therefore establishes the boundaries of the socio-ecological system (Ostrom, 2009), in which the natural environment influences, and is influenced by business practices which mainly involve local farmers, cheesemakers and consumers, although the inevitable transformations of their mutual interests, as has been observed previously, tend to influence the very configuration of the system.

However, the resulting market is considered much more trustworthy in terms of food safety, not only by the closest consumers, but also by those further away, outside the region, who also appreciate its ability to create positive externalities, associated with the protection of the area's natural and cultural resources. This consensus is usually expressed in the preference shown for products from these areas and in the willingness to pay a price premium for them, provided that they are accompanied by guarantees of authenticity. First-hand information about the producers is particularly highly valued. This can take the form of a visit to the places of production, careful storytelling and, in some cases, the possibility of taking part in the production processes themselves.

Short supply chains therefore constitute a way in which different actors, driven by different interests, motivations and skills manage to preserve or modify the socio-ecological balance of a rural area, so revealing themselves as both an opportunity for and a threat to its possible regeneration.

5.1 Types of SFSCs in Molise

The central role played by agri-food supply chains in rural development dynamics in Molise is now evident. Numerous previous research studies on the ground (Belliggiano et al., 2020, 2021; Bindi, 2017; Bindi et al., 2022; De Rubertis et al., 2018; Labianca et al., 2020; Palmieri et al., 2017) have revealed the durability of supply chains in the dairy sector, whose well-known and widely appreciated quality of production had been negatively affected by the perverse effects of the competitive productivism of the first CAP and by the widespread reconversion of the regional livestock system to become part of the poultry supply chain, a radical change initiated at the beginning of the 1980s by precise industrial policy instructions (De Rubertis & Belliggiano, in press; Forleo et al., 2017; Ievoli et al., 2017). There is a wide variety of dairy supply chains in the region, which coexist, often overlapping and interrelated, and would seem to be related with at least three of the types mentioned above.

1. EAS supply chains. The final type of direct contact with the market can be found in businesses that are deeply rooted in the territory, some of which have a long history in dairy practices linked to transhumance. These businesses play an important role in the real historical and cultural defence of the territory, in at least one case showing a significant commitment to the protection and promotion of local traditions (the company runs a museum in honour of the dairying craft), and at the same time considerable success on the international market achieved

through competitions, contacts with high-quality restaurants, directly capturing a share of the demand for experience-based tourism in the area and engaging in intensive, profitable e-commerce.

The production chain is organized around the availability of local raw materials. The leading companies have deliberately decided not to travel the expected normal path towards growth by increasing the scale of production (with the associated, sometimes significant economies of scale this can bring), opting instead to devote themselves to securing constant improvements in the quality of their products. They also concentrate on the best ways of taking commercial advantage of these advances and on seizing and developing the opportunities offered by local externalities. It is worth emphasizing that, for one of the most representative products in the Molise dairy sector, the close links with the territory led one of the leading companies to prefer the PAT (Regional traditional foods) certification to the Protected Designation of Origin (PDO). This is because the PDO brand also conjured up a territory in another distant region of Southern Italy and could perhaps have confused the consumer, so jeopardizing the very uniqueness on which the product's competitive advantage is based.

2. ERE supply chains. They are usually more recent and have a clearly industrial approach to business. They do not renounce the externalities offered by the territory, choosing instead to flaunt their rootedness, which is evoked in various different ways. For example, by associating their corporate brand with the name of the most representative town in the area in order to exploit the town's reputation, enhanced and endorsed by the existence of other EAS supply chains. The ERE supply chains reach very distant markets through their own distribution networks or through large-scale retail networks, sometimes without forgetting the link with local consumers, cultivated through specially created points of sale. The focus of large companies on large markets and the associated large production volumes this requires obliges them to look for internal economies of scale. This can have important negative effects on the networks of local subcontractors, who are "forced" to adapt their processes to the demands of their main clients. These changes could involve, for example, converting the farm from pastoralism to intensive livestock rearing, the introduction of better performing breeds, increased dependence on the feed industry, etc. The hazier relationship with local traditions, at least in one of the cases observed, led the company in question to certify some of its products as PDO, knowing full well that it was giving up greater territorial specificity, in a move towards a less restrictive model (an option which by contrast was rejected by the EAS company, as mentioned above). This also enabled them to broaden the area from which they sourced their raw materials.
3. Hybrid supply chains. In many cases, SFSCs have features of both EAS and ERE. Some companies have striven to consolidate a reputation based essentially on their belonging to a particular local area, via a careful quality policy, obtained both through a more rigorous selection of the raw materials (exclusively from Italy) and by recovering the dairy practices typical of this area, relying on the skills

and the prestige accumulated over the course of history. In this way, they have restored to their products some of the organoleptic characteristics recognized by consumers as specific to this area. In one well-documented case, these special characteristics led to the company being identified and selected to supply an international franchise for the promotion of Italian products, because it complied with all the strict requirements. The company was therefore able to instal a micro-dairy in an Arab country, almost 6000 km away from its headquarters, where it could make some of the products that would be sold in that region, using semi-finished products from its factory in Molise. The introduction and promotion of a product that was completely unknown to locals in an alien context were based on a profitable direct relationship of trust with customers, similar to that described for the face-to-face or proximate supply chains, which could only be achieved by partial delocalization of production (with the corresponding distortion of the supply chain). The success of this first experience in Arab countries has also encouraged the company to replicate this initiative in other places in the Middle East.

5.2 Compliance with and Divergence from EU (LEADER Programme) and National (SNAI) Policies

As mentioned earlier, the typologies described above coexist, merging and interacting, giving rise to imitations. Some companies also make clear attempts to differentiate their products, by broadening and enhancing the variety of production solutions.

The spontaneous organization and reorganization of supply chains in a variety of forms are further enriched by the hybrid effects that regional, national and community policies continue to have on them.

The National Strategy for Internal Areas (SNAI) is one of the most important rural development policies in Italy today. The SNAI “is a territorial policy aimed at improving the quality of services to citizens and economic opportunities in inland rural areas at risk of marginalization [...]. In the short term, the Strategy has two main objectives, namely to upgrade the quantity and quality of services and to promote development projects that enhance the natural and cultural heritage of these areas, also focusing on local production chains. In the long term, the objective of the National Strategy [...] is to reverse the current demographic trends in the country’s inland rural areas” (SNAI, 2020, p. 7).

The aim of the SNAI is to activate the territorial capital of the areas in which it operates. To this end, it identifies a range of tools and objectives, including increasing the “typicality of agri-food systems” and the “enhancement of know-how and craftsmanship (hidden resources, local knowledge, based on local culture)” (SNAI, 2018, p. 7). The reference to short supply chains is explicit, but in the variations at local level, it is not emphasized in the way one would expect. Also, in the case of Molise, apart from the references to non-food supply chains (energy, forest-wood) in all the

programmatic documents for rural areas,¹ actions in support of SFSCs are envisaged in just two of the four areas: Matese and the Alto and Medio Sannio.

In Matese, the aim is to act exclusively on the demand side, experimenting with the supply of zero miles and short-chain food products: “the ultimate goal is to provide a model of food education that is a permanent, self-sustainable part of school and life” (Programme Framework Agreement). In the Alto Medio Sannio area, by contrast, actions focus more on supply and provide for specific training actions aimed at strengthening the companies in the dairy sector supply chains.

Despite the general interest in rural development, references to SFSCs and AFNs are scarce, probably to avoid duplicated or overlapping policy actions, given that these questions already crop up frequently in the measures and actions applied within the LEADER Programme and the related Rural Development Programme (RDP) for the Molise Region. Overall, however, the strategies seem to lack the necessary depth. There is insufficient knowledge of the structure of the supply chains and of the combined effects that can be produced by the different types of chain in terms of both sectoral growth and identity consolidation/transformation and, by extension, territorial development.

The RDP seems to suffer from similar problems, starting from the same definition of short supply chain as a “supply chain that has no more than one intermediary between farmer and consumer”, as set out in a call for bids or “sub-measure” (*sottomisura*²), which faithfully replicates the definition set out in Regulation n.807/2014 (European Commission, 2014). This definition places the emphasis on cooperation between agricultural enterprises and the other actors within the local agri-food system, limiting its scope solely to the Proximate³ type of supply chain, so excluding all practices involving direct reconnection between agricultural (and non-agricultural) enterprises and consumers, both near (face-to-face) and distant (extended). This limit would seem to be confirmed by the scores envisaged for the “evaluation of the partnership”, which, in said call for bids, are calculated exclusively on the basis of the number of companies involved (>20 units), rather than on the sustainability of their production practices and/or their compatibility with the development paths and objectives established for the particular area. This approach would seem to have discouraged the participation of companies that seek to reconnect producers and consumers, as evidenced by the low participation in the tender process (few applications, of which only one was eligible for funding).

As a result, “intermediation” projects have ended up being favoured at the expense of production projects, especially if they are promoted by pre-existing well-structured or institutionalized bodies (such as farmer’s organizations). These initiatives are

¹ The documentation is available at: agenziacoesione.gov.it/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne/regione-molise-aree-interne.

² “Support for supply chain cooperation for the creation and development of short supply chains and local markets and support for promotional activities at a local level related to the development of short supply chains”

³ Given that the announcement refers to both short food supply chains and “local markets”, i.e. those that the Molise Region defines as the markets “to which agricultural and processed products coming from no more than 70 km away belong” (<https://psr.regione.molise.it/>, visited 27th November 2022).

evidently capable of securing much wider involvement of the farms in the area and of certifying the origin of the products, but not of guaranteeing respect for the resources and the practices of the territories from which they come. This is the prerogative of the “middlemen” in the proximate supply chains (e.g. farm shops and restaurants), as noted earlier.

The actions envisaged in this call for bids are therefore focused once again on agricultural development rather than rural development objectives (Marenco, 2007). Indeed, they reward companies who are prepared to adapt their products to a wider market, so as to consolidate or maintain their competitiveness. Standardization practices are also endorsed. By undermining the specificity of local human relationships and practices, these practices jeopardize the non-fungibility of products and reduce the variety of the product range. However, it is also important to note the priority given to the short supply chains operating within the dairy sector in mountain areas, in that in the procedure for evaluating the applications, almost 40% of the total points available were reserved for chains of this kind, a clear sign of their economic and social importance. This shows that the decision-makers are aware of the social and economic importance of this specific production sector, which is a strongly characteristic feature of various different rural communities.

Short food chains could therefore have been the main tool to bring about the expected paradigm shift for regional agriculture (Van der Ploeg, 2006), freeing up the economic potential referred to in the policies. However, the way in which this was expressed in the RDP does not seem to have been very effective, especially in the more marginal areas. This may be due to the attention paid to increasing the competitiveness of agricultural businesses, rather than to the need to ensure the regeneration of social practices. The latter, in fact, would also help protect the natural and cultural resources of rural communities and would offer them new business opportunities that could halt, or at least contain, depopulation.

This interpretation of short food supply chains would also seem to have influenced the strategic choices of the four regional LAGs. Despite having centred their development path on their regenerative potential, by selecting SFSCs as a priority from amongst the ten indicated by the region, the LAGs ended up conforming to the particular interpretation of development proposed for SFSCs by the RDP for Molise.

Indeed, in the local development plan put forward by the LAG, which includes documented cases of EAS and ERE supply chains, short supply chains are mentioned exclusively as a way of underlining how well the plan complies with the regional strategy, and their application is limited to improving the competitiveness of farms (“Better integration of primary producers in the agri-food chain through [...] short chains [...] will contribute to Priority 3 of the Molise RDP [...] with a specific focus on the dairy sector, the natural vocation of the reference area”). However, a different, and perhaps not perfectly conscious, interpretation of these chains would seem to emerge from the strategy of the LAG itself, when it emphasizes the economic potential of a strong connection between local agri-food production and sustainable tourism (“the agri-food supply chains will have to be reorganized and/or reinforced not only in response to local demand, but also to non-local demand, which should

grow in line with the increase in tourist flows expected in the area”), so conjuring up structures closer to the very short EAS chains.

Even in the LAG’s local development plan, where there is a documented case of a hybrid supply chain, short food supply chains are combined with sustainable tourism, to such an extent that they are considered an “essential” component of the local tourist offer. Furthermore, the dairy chains are described as having “strong roots and territorial recognition”, thus revealing, in this case too, a certain tendency towards EAS. That tendency, as it is not entirely explicit, may also not be entirely conscious.

6 Conclusions

When examining the relationship between short food supply chains and the local area, it is possible to reach quite different conclusions depending on whether one approaches this question from the perspective of territorial development or merely in terms of economic growth. And, as we have seen, the final consequences are not always obvious either. SFSCs represent an important element of territorial capital: in their intangible dimension, they should be included within the generative components of TC, in the sense that they produce, reproduce and consolidate relationships of trust and local skills in ways that increase both human and social capital.

In their tangible dimension (and related typicality), they are also elements of the sedimented part of TC. Like any other component of TC, the typical features of SFSCs are the result of long processes of gradual sedimentation of knowledge and practices linked to local values and even long-term objectives of the local community. In this way, they are not only a product of the community but also an expression of its way of life. In fact, it is the medium and long-term objectives that best characterize local identities, together with their institutional arrangements. On the basis of these objectives, which are both identity- and development-based, in this paper, we examined the potential of different types of supply chain, taking a slightly different approach from those used so far in the literature.

In the case of Molise, a southern Italian region of about 300,000 inhabitants, characterized by a substantial presence of agri-food and dairy businesses, at least three of the types of supply chains presented earlier were identified.

We focused, in particular, on the *extended* category, which includes cases in which the increase in the distance between producer and consumer does not lead to a substantial uprooting of the short supply chain, as this distance is generally proportional to the success and popularity achieved by the products. By connecting “distant” actors, extended supply chains appear as long networks that can either consolidate or transform identity, depending on the way they are constructed and the functions they perform. To this end, we distinguish between “relatively extended” and “absolutely short” supply chains.

In relatively extended short supply chains (ERE), consumption takes place a long way from the place where the good is produced and there is no direct contact with the

producer; the reputation of the product is built on the “cultural keys” of the recipient and this has inevitable, not always deliberate, effects on the product, on the processes and on local “ways of being”. Effects on local organization are therefore possible, in terms of pro-identity changes (if consistent with development objectives) or changes in identity (if changes are also made in the objectives). In Molise, they usually have a relatively more recent history and a clear industrial vocation. They reach very large, distant markets through their own distribution networks or through large-scale retailers, which is why they favour internal economies of scale with important effects on the networks of local subcontractors, who are “forced” to adapt their processes to the needs of their most important customers.

In extended absolutely short (EAS) supply chains, consumption takes place on site, regardless of where the consumer comes from. Direct contact with producers is based and consolidated on trust and reputational mechanisms that encourage relationships with residents, day-trippers and tourists.

In Molise, these companies play a real role in the historical-cultural defence of the territory, while developing a modern-day venture into the international market. They have renounced internal economies of scale to seize the opportunities offered by local externalities (which they praise).

Of course, the distinction between ERE and EAS is never so clear-cut. In fact, the supply chains in Molise today often have elements of both kinds. In some cases, overlaps have also been detected with face-to-face and proximate supply chains. All these types coexist, interacting with each other, giving rise to imitations but also to deliberate attempts to differentiate themselves, so broadening the variety of production solutions.

As regards economic growth objectives, the supply chains seem to breathe new life into the companies that take part in them, in different ways in the various types. They present profoundly different strategic directions and relationships with the territory, while highlighting in all cases the desire, at least in part, to benefit from the image of the territory and the externalities it provides.

In terms of territorial development objectives, the relationship appears less linear and less predictable. The resource management strategies are completely different. Some are based on protecting and enhancing traditions and others on abandoning them in favour of an approach based purely on efficiency and productivity. For example, the EAS supply chains, in some cases, adopt distribution policies which, on the one hand, support the sales prices of local raw materials and, on the other, seek the continuous improvement of production standards, through direct collaboration with local farmers, who are encouraged to improve the quality of the raw material in exchange for a larger share of the added value. These strategies have little to do with the adaptive strategies applied by other types of supply chain, which may have impacts on identity which, as illustrated above, require discussion processes and specific policy actions.

The main rural development policy instruments applied in Molise are the Rural Development Plan (co-financed by the EU and the Italian government), which includes the LEADER Programme, and the National Strategy for Internal Areas (SNAI, financed by the Italian government). There are large areas of overlap between

the objectives of the two policy instruments and, in both cases, agri-food short supply chains are presented as important levers for rural development. However, in the local variants of the development projects for individual internal areas, the references to supply chains appear weak and quite irrelevant. By contrast, in the case of the LAGs (LEADER programme), they are much clearer. However, they still seem to want to reward the tendency towards competitiveness-based objectives. The strategies seem to be aimed in particular at shortening the supply chain. By reducing the number of intermediaries (possibly to one), the aim is to keep a larger share of the added value in the local area near the farmers.

In short, the objectives of territorial development remain hidden or at least hard to identify, demonstrating that the policies have (yet) to acquire the necessary depth.

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The Role of Cooperation and Tourism in Rural Development—Long-term Research Activities in the Alpujarra of Almería (Spain)



Andreas Voth

Abstract Insufficient cooperation and a lack of continuity are frequently identified problems in rural development processes. Specific individual initiatives are often neither sufficiently coordinated nor accompanied by the necessary research work. More knowledge is required about cooperation, governance structures and success factors in rural development practices. Sparsely populated mountain areas in Andalusia face particular challenges, but they also have specific potentials and opportunities to make rural development processes more dynamic, including the promotion of sustainable tourism. Well-preserved, diverse natural and cultural heritage can be a fundamental resource, although its valorisation is a challenging process that needs cooperation and continuous efforts at different levels. Various mountain villages in the Alpujarra—a scenic landscape on the southern slopes of Sierra Nevada—have together become a famous destination for hiking and rural tourism. These villages are in the western part of the Alpujarra, which belongs to the province of Granada. By contrast, the eastern part of the Alpujarra in the province of Almería is less well-known and is lagging behind. In this chapter, we present some results of long-term research activities about the role of cooperation and tourism in rural development in small municipalities in the semi-arid east of the “unknown Alpujarra”.

Keywords Rural areas · Tourism development · Cooperation · Alpujarra

1 Introduction

Many territories on the rural periphery of southern Spain are suffering serious structural deficiencies as a result of long-lasting processes of depopulation. Specific problems include the abandonment of traditional agriculture, a lack of economic alternatives, low population density and the very small size of many municipalities. A lack of cooperation between stakeholders and between public institutions is one of

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the major obstacles to development. Sectoral development initiatives are not broad enough to overcome the structural and functional crises facing these areas. Tourism projects alone can rarely solve the problems. Nevertheless, the promotion of tourism based on a rich natural and cultural heritage has been shown to be an important component of development strategies that seek to stimulate economic diversification. The aim of this chapter is to highlight the opportunities for sustainable tourism and the factors on which its successful promotion could be based. We also analyse the importance of cooperation at different levels, using the Alpujarra of Almería at the eastern end of Sierra Nevada as an example.

The development processes in the Alpujarra of Almería have been accompanied over several years by scientific research from various different perspectives of economic geography and tourism, in which the main focus has been on multi-level cooperation, networks of actors, reflections on successful rural development practices, and the importance of spatial and thematic linkages. The research projects were coordinated with local stakeholders and public bodies and carried out with groups of students from the Master's Degree in Economic Geography and Rural Development from the RWTH Aachen University (Germany). The outcomes are summarised and discussed in this chapter. The successive empirical studies began in the Alpujarra of Granada in 2016 and continued the following year with an image study on the Alpujarra of Almería as a new tourism destination. These initial research activities were followed by more in-depth analysis of specific tourism initiatives, such as the revival and valorisation of a medieval pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela, which starts in Almería. This route has been restored, signposted and promoted in a bottom-up process that began with an interregional cooperation project involving several LEADER groups. The innovative implementation of this project is boosting the transition to new forms of governance at various levels. In the years that followed, these studies were continued with others exploring the role of natural and cultural heritage in rural development in the municipalities along the route (food tourism, geotourism, water culture).

2 Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Rural areas are the subject of scientific research in numerous disciplines. Their complexity requires an interdisciplinary approach to a wide range of topics. Textbooks on rural geography usually also address the effects and the potential of tourism and analyse the processes that take place in the tension field between external control and endogenous development, often from the perspective of sustainability in all its various dimensions (Henkel, 2020). The valorisation of rural heritage opens up broad opportunities in tourism and regional marketing, as a response to rural restructuring and the need for "selling the countryside" (Woods, 2005). However, the strong differentiation of rural areas, which is also the subject of numerous studies in geography, deserves special consideration. In Spain, in particular, there are striking differences between rural areas, as a classification proposed by Molinero Hernández (2019)

demonstrates. Within this classification, many of the municipalities of Sierra Nevada and the interior of the province of Almería were assigned to the “deep rural” and “stagnant rural” categories, despite their relative proximity to the Mediterranean coast. In the mountains of Andalusia, insufficiently coordinated measures for the development of deep rural areas have so far been unable to counteract the consequences of the demographic crisis (Rodríguez Martínez, 2011). In the province of Almería, contrasts between the dynamic coastal strip and the sparsely populated, mountainous hinterland are particularly strong. Nevertheless, it is precisely this diversity of landscapes and proximity to the beach that could open up opportunities for the development and combination of different forms of rural tourism.

A review of the literature on rural development concepts reveals a broad discussion on specific local conditions, objectives, organisational structures and internal/external influencing factors, as well as terminological differences. Guinjoan et al., (2016, p. 197) defined rural development as the improvement of the economic, social and cultural conditions in a rural territory, respecting the physical environment, with positive impacts on the quality of life of the resident population and integrating the territory into society as a whole. The diversification of business activity in rural areas, the networks of local actors and their governance structures are central elements in public policies and in rural development practice. Indeed, these relationships between actors are at the heart of LEADER as a territorial approach (Esparcia & Abassi, 2020). However, territorial governance faces many barriers and remains a challenge in (neo-endogenous) rural development processes. Territory is a physical and functionally defined space—a social construct and a complex system that must be observed and defined from different perspectives. It is crucial to understand the various component parts and interrelationships within a territory, so as to be able to approach rural development from an integrated perspective of its real situation (García Lorca, 2011). Defining the territory was a fundamental question in the first research project in the Alpujarra of Almería and served as a basis for the subsequent research activities presented in this chapter.

One of the central objectives of the LEADER initiative is to help rural economies diversify, and many Local Action Groups (LAGs) have focused on tourism as a means of achieving this goal. Research results from eastern Andalusia, including the Alpujarra, show a high success rate of the tourism projects implemented in the first phases of LEADER (Navarro Valverde et al., 2018). Most of the businesses that received LEADER support remain in operation. In Andalusia, the commitment of LEADER to rural tourism remains strong (Maroto Martos et al., 2020) and in fact has increased in the most recent programming period with a clearer orientation towards more sustainable, more innovative projects (Nieto Figueras et al., 2022). The growing prominence of tourism projects is closely related to the increasing appreciation and valorisation of rural heritage. The protection and promotion of natural and cultural heritage, and their linkage and attachment to the territory, have become significant drivers of rural identity and development. Many LEADER projects implemented in Andalusia focus on agrarian heritage, and investments in initiatives of this kind are especially high in the LAGs in the Alpujarra (Cejudo et al., 2020).

The research activities carried out between 2016 and 2022 sought to gain insights into the development perspectives for tourism and into cooperation structures and linkages in the rural territory of the Alpujarra of Almería. As an introduction to the chosen topics, the literature, statistical data and online sources on these issues were analysed. Quantitative and qualitative methods were combined in accordance with the respective research issues. The multi-method approaches included surveys, interviews, thematic mapping, on-site observations, photographic documentation and workshops with local actors. For an analysis of the internal (as seen by local residents) and external (as seen by people from other areas) images of the Alpujarra of Almería, two standardised questionnaires were prepared to enable us to conduct a comparative study. The first questionnaire was aimed at the inhabitants of single municipalities (local level), the Alpujarra (*comarca* or county level) and other parts of the province of Almería (upper spatial level), while the second was directed towards visitors (in Spanish, English and German).

In order to find out more about the identity of a particular territory, it is important to capture the subjective perceptions of local people about the place where they live, and of visitors about how it is perceived as a tourist destination. Various methods applied in the geography of perception are helpful here (Millán Escriche, 2004). A study of the internal image of a biosphere reserve in Austria (Rumpolt, 2009) combined the method of mental maps with a survey of the local population and interviews. We used the same method to define the Alpujarra as perceived by different groups of population and visitors.

Our research activities always started in the municipality of Alboloduy (620 inhabitants) and extended to other municipalities in the Alpujarra of Almería, along the axis formed by the Andarax and Nacimiento rivers. Alboloduy was a good logistical base for carrying out research activities with groups of students due to its favourable geographical location at the eastern end of the Sierra Nevada in the Nacimiento Valley and the good relationship we established with a local administration who were interested in supporting research studies. Some of our research was deliberately extended to the city of Almería in order to learn more about the urban perspective on rural tourism in the Alpujarra and about mountain-lowland relations.

The research topics and methods are summarised in Table 1. The results of each study served as the basis for developing research questions for subsequent projects. Special attention was given to the continuous enhancement of contacts with local actors and the diffusion of research results relevant to rural development. In 2020 and 2021, the research activities were interrupted by the pandemic. Detailed results of the first projects have been published in Andalusia (Guil Soriano & Voth, 2021; Voth & Guil Soriano, 2023; Voth, 2018a, 2020).

As one of the main themes explored in this chapter is cooperation, of all the different questions tackled in our research, we will be focusing primarily on the image study and the pilgrimage route, where cooperation has been of paramount importance.

Table 1 Research activities in the Alpujarra of Almería

Year	Research topics	Methods
2016	Tourism and rural development in Sierra Nevada, Alpujarra of Granada	Survey (n = 319), interviews, observation, cartography
2017	The “unknown Alpujarra” of Almería as a new tourism destination (image study)	Survey (n = 323), interviews, observation, cartography
2018	Rural development on the Way of St. James: Camino Mozárabe de Santiago in Almería	Survey (n = 330), interviews, cartography, workshop, conference
2019	Gastronomy and tourism development in Almería and the Alpujarra	Survey (n = 209), interviews, observation, cartography, workshop
2022	Geosites and potential for geotourism along the axis between Almería and Guadix	Interviews, observation, workshop, drone flights, cartography
2023	Water culture as a resource for tourism and rural development	Interviews, observation, photo documentation, cartography

Source The author

3 Study Area

The province of Almería is characterised by its peripheral location in the south-eastern corner of Spain, poor accessibility and a relatively late development as a tourist destination. Tourism in the province is highly dependent on the sun and beach segment and is more seasonal than in many other areas of Andalusia. The high concentration of tourism in time and space is a problem. Both population and tourists are strongly concentrated in the economically dynamic coastal municipalities.

Spatial disparities also exist within the Alpujarra, where tourism and positive demographic dynamics are concentrated in the municipalities most accessible from the coast or from the city of Granada, i.e. in the western part of the Alpujarra. While the population of the province of Almería as a whole has grown since the 1960s, the municipalities of the Alpujarra of Almería have suffered continuous decline. This is especially true in the small villages, some of which have less than 300 inhabitants left. In some areas, population density is less than 10 inhabitants per km². The problems of rural development in small communities affected by out-migration have become more prominent in policy and academic debates in recent decades (García Lorca & Matarín Guil, 2011). The implementation of rural development projects has led to an improvement in the quality of life and an enhancement of tourism resources, as can be seen in Alboloduy (Guil Soriano & Voth, 2018a, 2018b), but they have so far proved incapable of reversing the negative demographic trend, which remains one of the major challenges facing many rural areas today.

In today's urbanised society, the image of rural areas has changed. The vast majority of people visiting municipalities in inland areas of the province of Almería live in urban areas along the coast to where people from the villages have migrated in recent decades. The initiatives to promote rural development also reflect an increased interest in tourism in the hinterland, a vast mountain area segmented by provincial



Fig. 1 Regionalisation of tourism and protected areas in the provinces of Granada and Almería. *Source* The author

boundaries and changing delimitations of minor tourist destinations (Fig. 1). The existing protected areas and geoparks offer significant potential for rural development that has yet to be fully exploited. The mountain range of Sierra Nevada was first declared as a Nature Park and later, the higher part was declared a National Park with greater protection. Unfortunately, the Sierra Nevada is not marketed as a single tourist destination and instead is divided into smaller tourist areas formed by the different river basins, with no common marketing strategy.

The Alpujarra of Almería is a rural area with contrasting landscapes between high mountains and the Mediterranean Sea, between the National Park of Sierra Nevada and the protected landscape of the Tabernas Desert, the driest area of Europe. Its location halfway between two geoparks (Cabo de Gata and Guadix) could be regarded as an opportunity for the development of geotourism. The Alpujarra is also bestowed with an extraordinarily rich cultural heritage full of the historical remains of many civilisations. Sánchez Hita (2007) gives some impression of the great diversity of this rural heritage in a well-documented, thorough study, created on the initiative of the LEADER group, which originally encompassed the entire Alpujarra, and was later split into two, with one LAG covering the part in Granada and the other the part in Almería. Other publications, such as Gil Albarracín's (2010) book on traditional rural architecture in the province of Almería, also contribute to our knowledge of the area's heritage and its dissemination.

The “Alpujarra Sierra Nevada de Almería” LAG covers 32 municipalities, located not only in the Alpujarra of Almería, but also in the upper Nacimiento Valley, the middle Andarax Valley and the Poniente Almeriense. Thus, the LAG covers a completely different area than that charted in the official maps dividing up the area into tourist destinations. Likewise, it has little to do with the socio-economic sphere of influence of the National Park or with the perception of the Alpujarra of Almería displayed on the mental maps drawn by inhabitants and visitors. As a result, this area is criss-crossed by a whole array of different physical and administrative delimitations. A striking example of problematic territorial configuration can be found in the adjacent area of Tabernas, whose “planning disasters” and resulting problems were analysed by Sánchez Escolano (2015). The fragmentation and uncoordinated territorial demarcations at different spatial and sectoral levels, often made behind the public’s back, make coordination and cooperation in rural development difficult.

In the easternmost part of the Alpujarra of Almería, the Nacimiento River Valley passes the Sierra Nevada, the Sierra de los Filabres and the Tabernas Desert. This situation of overlapping territories with different characteristics could provide a comparative advantage, in that it results in a wide diversity of landscapes combined with a rich natural and cultural heritage. Nevertheless, the municipalities along this valley remain on the fringe of the tourism development processes observed in other parts of the Alpujarra.

4 Rural Development and Tourism in the “Unknown Alpujarra”

The image of a territory can be complex and variable. How is the Alpujarra, especially its eastern part, perceived and characterised? The definition, geographical delimitation and characterisation of the Alpujarra is not as easy as it might first appear. Perceptions and definitions vary from source to source and change over time. In a simplified way, the following phases of change can be distinguished (Voth, 2018a, 2018b) (1) A broad vision of the Alpujarra stretching from the peaks of Sierra Nevada down to the Mediterranean coast, based on the “*tahas*” or administrative districts into which it was divided in mediaeval times, and the accounts of the romantic travellers. (2) A reduced version hemmed within the southern slopes of the Sierra Nevada, due to the crisis of Mediterranean mountain areas from the middle of the twentieth century. (3) A recent extension of the perceived Alpujarra, linked with the upsurge in rural tourism, the policy of protected areas, rural development initiatives and its improved image, are causing many municipalities to want to be seen as part of the Alpujarra, which is gaining a good reputation as an attractive tourist destination.

However, the image of the Alpujarra that is projected to potential visitors is dominated by that of a few villages in the west of Sierra Nevada. The travel guides that refer to the Alpujarra are strongly biased towards these areas and tend to ignore or pay little attention to its eastern part. A well-illustrated guidebook of the province of

Almería (Ruiz García, 2015), that is widely sold to tourists, includes a short chapter on the Alpujarra of Almería, which is confined to the upper Andarax Valley. Its map of the province does not show any of the villages in the lower Nacimiento Valley. Furthermore, the Sierra Nevada Nature Park is confused with the National Park. The photos accompanying the text about the Alpujarra of Almería are mixed with photos from other parts of the province. Most guidebooks to the National Park cover the entire Sierra Nevada and highlight the uneven distribution of infrastructures and facilities for public use, which are concentrated in the Alpujarra of Granada. In some guidebooks, the maps are almost empty in the easternmost part of the Alpujarra. Due to the fact that it tends to be ignored, this area is often referred to as the “unknown Alpujarra” (García Lorca & Matarín Guil, 2008). How can we make this rural area better known?

Successful destination management and promotion require information about visitor’s perceptions and cooperation between the stakeholders at different levels. Furthermore, the different perceptions that tourists and locals have of a destination could be an obstacle to promoting it (Steinecke, 2013). It is essential that local people identify with the image being presented of their territory. When designing a marketing strategy, it is therefore necessary to take their perceptions into account. Internal marketing should raise awareness and try to integrate the local population into the design process.

When asked about the “Alpujarra” in general, the image that comes to most people’s minds is that of the Alpujarra of Granada, the dominant image of the southern slopes of Sierra Nevada. We therefore conducted a survey, in which respondents were specifically asked about the “Alpujarra of Almería”.

The aim of this survey was to analyse the perception and image of the Alpujarra of Almería as a tourist destination. 202 people, selected at random, were asked to answer a series of questions and to draw their own mental map of the area. All the maps were different, and each represented a personalised definition of the Alpujarra of Almería. Almost all the mental maps differ in some way from the official delimitation of the tourist destination, which we used as a model with which to compare and interpret the drawings. We then put all the individual drawings together to create a single overall mental map, the sum of the different boundaries drawn by each person. By superimposing transparent coloured layers, a clearer spatial image could be identified (Fig. 2).

This overall mental map offers us a vision of the Alpujarra of Almería centred on the upper Andarax Valley, extending eastward to the lower Nacimiento Valley. There is a wide transition zone between a central core area, perceived by almost all respondents as the Alpujarra of Almería, and some adjoining areas. For some people, the Alpujarra of Almería even extends north of the River Nacimiento and south of the Sierra de Gádor. Of particular interest is the subjective spatial delimitation of the Alpujarra from the perspective of the different groups of people surveyed (i.e. inhabitants of the Alpujarra, the city of Almería and some tourists). If we compare the mental maps produced by each group, there are many similarities between them, but also some striking differences. A quantitative analysis of the mental maps confirms that well over 80% of all respondents regard the core area in the Andarax Valley as

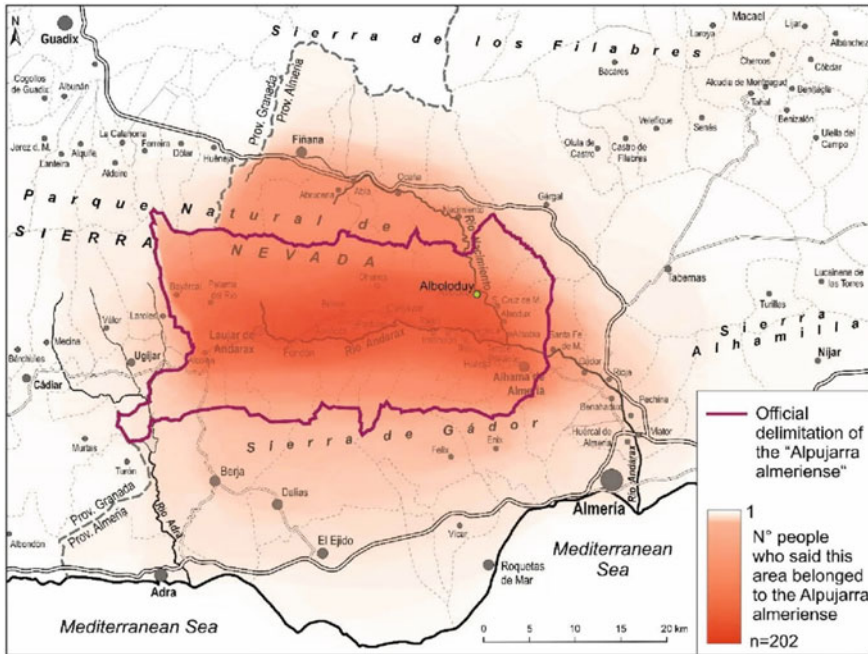


Fig. 2 Perception of the Alpujarra of Almería: Mental maps. Source Voth (2018a), modified

part of the “Alpujarra”, while only 30 to 40% considered that the municipalities in the upper Nacimiento Valley, i.e. north of the Sierra Nevada, were in the “Alpujarra”, even though these municipalities belong to the same LEADER LAG. When asked whether Alboloduy was part of the Alpujarra, 70% of the respondents from the city of Almería said yes, while the figure for the inhabitants of Alboloduy itself was even higher at over 80%.

The survey shows that the inhabitants of the province have a high opinion of the Alpujarra of Almería. We asked respondents to evaluate various aspects of its internal and external image. The method involved awarding a score (from + 2 to -2) on a scale between two sharply opposing adjectives or divergent statements describing the province (e.g. a score ranging from + 2 for diverse stunning landscape to -2 for boring, monotonous landscape). If we compare the evaluation of the Alpujarra of Almería by the inhabitants of the inland towns and villages with those from the coast, we can see that the two groups essentially coincide in their positive perception, with the locals’ perception of their Alpujarra being even more positive. Its diverse landscapes and well-conserved local traditions and environment were considered important factors in its image. The natural environment—traditionally considered adverse for many forms of land use—is viewed as favourable for certain tourist activities. The region’s unique combination of climatic, geomorphological, geological and cultural characteristics makes it incomparable with other Spanish or European tourist destinations (Table 2).

Table 2 Strengths of the Alpujarra of Almería that could be used to develop tourism

Spatial location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Between high mountains, the desert, historical cities and the coast – Multiple options for products combining different types of tourism – Short distances that enable a combination of different activities and the design of thematic routes – Potential for day trips, and medium and long stays
Climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Unique climate unlike anywhere else in Europe – Mild temperatures almost all year round – Aridity, stability and high luminosity
Landforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Diverse geomorphological forms, attractive landscapes – Panoramic and cinematographic views – Great potential for active tourism, hiking
Geodiversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Abundance of spectacular georesources, two geoparks nearby – Good visibility, polychrome rocks, scientific interest, mining heritage
Protected areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Sierra Nevada National Park and Nature Park, Desert of Tabernas
Cultural heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Unique monuments, rural architecture, Camino Mozárabe – A living intangible heritage: music, festivals, legends, etc
Rural elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Uniqueness of rural ethnological and agrarian heritage – Attractiveness of agricultural landscapes and water culture – Local peculiarities: historic and contemporary elements
Gastronomy and local products	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Potential to highlight quality, authenticity and local origin – Opportunity to combine tradition and innovation

Source Voth (2018a), modified

These positive image factors could be used to help develop and promote the Alpujarra as a tourist destination—and invite people to discover its unknown corners. However, the survey, interviews and field observations also reveal a series of problems that are hindering the socio-economic development of the area (Table 3). As noted earlier, tourism development alone is rarely sufficient to reverse the demographic decline, but it can bring complementary economic activities into a depressed area and can help maintain the level of services available to the local population. Some of the challenges and options highlighted below will be addressed in this chapter, especially those relating to cooperation and coordination in rural development.

In a bid to promote the economic diversification of the region, the Local Development Strategy of the LEADER group included tourism in the section on “Economy and Productive Structure” (ADR Alpujarra Sierra Nevada de Almería, 2016). Previously, the LAG had also taken part in a special Tourism Plan for the Alpujarra of Almería, mainly implemented between 2010 and 2014, with the aim of offering more information to visitors and raising awareness of this mountain area. The basic infrastructure for receiving visitors consists of information modules in the centre of each village or in the car park, as well as signposted walks around village streets,

Table 3 Challenges for tourism development in the Alpujarra of Almería and possible solutions

Challenges	Possible solutions
Demographic decline and lack of employment opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Maintain and improve local services – Promote professional training and investment
This part of the Alpujarra is largely unknown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Study local heritage and disseminate information – Promote internal and external regional marketing
Varying definitions of the Alpujarra area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Coordinate measures to create a destination profile – Continue the process initiated by the Tourism Plan
Deficiencies in infrastructure and accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Improve roads, access and signposting – Promote public transport and encourage its use
Localism & lack of cooperation and coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Raise awareness of the advantages of cooperation – Promote common projects at different levels
Lack of awareness and private initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Encourage interest in creating tourism products – Encourage participation in developing ideas
Eyesores, untidiness, rubbish dumps, etc	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Control unsightly visual impacts – Promote awareness of the need to care for heritage
Problems of urban planning and landscape protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Use empty buildings, avoid constructions that jar – Avoid spoiling scenery e.g. with greenhouses
Low acceptance of the protected area of Sierra Nevada	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Promote acceptance, participation, cooperation – Valorise the Park, regional marketing and branding

Source Voth (2018a), modified

an application for mobile phones with information about each municipality and a network of thematic viewpoints. In some places, the information panels now look unkempt or run-down. Due to vandalism or negligence, some of them have been lost. Once the grants for installing them have been spent, very little is invested in further maintenance. Many policy-makers have an insufficient sense of responsibility for long-term development and prefer the short-term political gains from inaugurating new projects, which are later not maintained.

Under the slogan “Leave your Mark” (*Deja tu huella*), the aforementioned Tourism Plan promoted the enhancement of the vestiges of the different civilisations that had left their mark on the Alpujarra landscape (ancient mines, terraced slopes, human settlements, aromatic plants, and water supply and irrigation). Unfortunately, this slogan clashes with the awareness campaign launched by the Sierra Nevada National Park (“Leave no Mark”, *no dejes huella*) to encourage people to

behave responsibly and look after the mountainside. This is an example of the lack of coordination between different initiatives.

One of the strongest attractions of the Alpujarra is the National Park. Protected areas can be positive features in the image of a tourist destination. In the case of the Sierra Nevada, various conflicts of interest, insufficient dissemination of information and a lack of acceptance of the protected area by the local population make it difficult to enhance its value for tourism development. From the point of view of the people living in the area bordering the park, the restrictions on different uses seem to weigh more heavily than the subsidies paid by the park administration to promote various development measures in the different municipalities. Instead of continuing rigid top-down planning, the management of protected areas must seek to increase participation and integrate the interests of the population and the local authorities.

Locals and visitors each have their own perceptions of the landscape and the peculiarities of the region. It is particularly interesting to find out which places in the Alpujarra of Almería the inhabitants themselves consider most attractive. An innovative guidebook was published, listing the “28 Wonders of the Andarax” to highlight the tangible and intangible cultural and landscape heritage of the area (Coe & Viana, 2016). Local people were asked to vote for the “wonders” that they thought should be included in the guide. This participative initiative was a sign of how strongly local people identify with the heritage of their territory. Three of the wonders voted for are located in the municipality of Alboloduy.

The case of Alboloduy illustrates the achievements, challenges and options for a municipality in the Alpujarra that is promoting tourism as a complementary factor to be taken into account in local development processes (Guil Soriano & Voth, 2018a, 2018b). A Local Development Plan was drawn up with a participatory methodology involving the different agents and social groups in the municipality and the wider population. This was summarised in a diagram presenting the main problems and solutions (Matarín Guil, 2013). The most serious problem facing the municipality was the lack of economic activity, which had knock-on effects in terms of depopulation, an increase in the average age, a lack of basic services, etc. Faced with these challenges, the Local Development Plan established several objectives to increase basic services, improve the quality of life and favour job creation in order to encourage people to stay. To achieve these goals, it was necessary to reduce dependence on subsidies through the modernisation of agriculture and to use endogenous resources for tourism, improve municipal infrastructures and foment entrepreneurship by offering training to local people. It was also considered important to motivate the existing business sector and encourage public participation. The enhancement of its potential for tourism is part of complex objectives and one of the main strategies. In a local governance process, a new development strategy (“Alboloduy Inteligente”) is currently being created, based on a Smart Village model and oriented towards the implementation of the sustainable development goals set by the United Nations Agenda 2030 (Guil Soriano & Matarín Guil, 2021).

5 The Need for Cooperation

In rural development and in the promotion of tourism, the need for large numbers of stakeholders and institutions to actively cooperate can lead to bottlenecks that are hard to overcome. Cooperation can have a multidimensional character and varying levels of complexity as it involves actors in different sectors and on several spatial levels. For the successful development of networks, tourism destinations depend on different types of cooperation: horizontal cooperation between several destinations, vertical cooperation between the different levels of the tourism supply chain, and sideways cooperation within a destination with partners from other sectors of the economy and society (Steinecke, 2013). The configuration of partnerships varies according to spatial levels, thematic objectives and the compatibility with the image of the tourist destination.

One of the main obstacles to the development of tourism in the Alpujarra, as in many rural areas, is localism. Encouraging the numerous municipalities in the Alpujarra to cooperate effectively remains a great challenge, as is coordinating the different local actors within each municipality. Even objectives that might seem easy to achieve—such as reaching an agreement among the bars and restaurants in a village to ensure that they do not all close on the same day of the week—may, in practice, be almost impossible to achieve. There is a lack of willingness and awareness of the advantages that cooperation between the different actors in a municipality, or even at inter-county level, can bring. The organisation of cultural events and thematic routes, for example, depends very much on willingness to cooperate. The initiative and enthusiasm of a few people can be sufficient to get a common project of the ground. Cooperation can also have positive outcomes when it comes to applying for funds and implementing joint projects. However, these efforts are wasted if cooperation comes to an end once the projects have been implemented. The objectives of rural and tourism development require long-term continuity in cooperative relations. The involvement of local actors is not only desirable in individual projects, but also in the design of marketing ideas and strategies.

Some municipalities are more dynamic at promoting local development and cooperation than others. Success often depends on the strong personal commitment of individual actors. Just as their engagement and experience in cooperation can facilitate the growth and consolidation of networks, so their withdrawal can lead to the interruption of development processes that had started successfully. Cooperation is also frequently hindered by the differing objectives of local entities or actors, lack of trust, a shortage of personnel and financial resources, excessive localism, the politicisation of development projects, and administrative and political barriers.

The municipalities in the area surrounding the Sierra Nevada National Park, as mentioned above, should join forces in order to make better use of the opportunities arising from their proximity to a well-known protected natural area. An attempt to include the Alpujarra in the UNESCO heritage list failed due to internal disagreement and a lack of political consensus within the multitude of municipalities involved

(Voth, 2018b). Linkages within the entire Alpujarra that transcend administrative boundaries should be strengthened.

The marketing of tourism in the province of Almería is still highly focused on the coastal beach resorts (“Costa de Almería”). Mountain destinations are not properly integrated into tourism concepts and closer links between areas to the north and south of the Sierra Nevada of Almería would be desirable. These areas are separated by the deep, almost inaccessible canyon formed by the Nacimiento River between the upper and lower valleys. A project for the revitalization of a historical pilgrimage route, the Camino Mozárabe de Santiago (running from Almería to Granada and from there to Santiago de Compostela), has overcome this barrier by connecting the villages of the Nacimiento Valley. This joint initiative involving several LAGs is an outstanding example of territorial cooperation, which links municipalities, actors and issues relating to tourism and rural development at different levels.

6 The Camino Mozárabe as an Axis for Cooperation and Rural Development

The recovery of a historical pilgrimage route, the *Camino Mozárabe de Santiago* (Mozarabic Way of St. James), which runs around the east and north of Sierra Nevada, forms part of the increasing valorisation of historical-cultural heritage. The *Camino Mozárabe* was a mediaeval route used by Christians known as “*Mozárabes*”, who were living in the Moorish kingdoms in the south of the Iberian Peninsula. After a long period of decline, the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela (to the tomb of the Apostle St. James) has shown rapid growth in the last two decades. The main route of this European Cultural Itinerary, the *Camino Francés* across northern Spain, is already showing signs of overcrowding, and alternative routes are attracting attention in several regions of Spain and in other European countries. One of these newly emerging, recovered pilgrimage routes is the *Camino Mozárabe*. This is the longest route to Santiago in that it starts in the opposite corner of Spain, in Almería in the south-east. Its revitalization offers opportunities for the enhancement of the rich cultural heritage of small municipalities and is considered an instrument of territorial cohesion, image diffusion, regional marketing and rural development.

The revival of various routes of the Camino de Santiago has stimulated growing academic research interest from different disciplines, and this is reflected in a boom of publications on pilgrimage tourism to Santiago (Santos, 2022). Most studies focus on the heavily frequented *Camino Francés*, where the municipalities on the route have become much more concerned about the conservation of their infrastructure and heritage. In this way, the Camino helps promote environmental and territorial awareness, as well as offering a boost for local initiatives and the enhancement of cultural identity (Martín Duque, 2017).

In the province of Almería, empirical research was conducted in the Nacimiento Valley in 2018 in order to analyse the role of this cultural itinerary as an element of territorial articulation and strengthening of local identity that stimulates cooperation between different actors and institutions, so helping improve the quality of life in the small municipalities. In collaboration with the *Asociación Jacobea de Almería-Granada Camino Mozárabe* and the municipality of Alboloduy, the research group from the RWTH Aachen University gathered information through 40 interviews with public institutions and local actors, complemented by a workshop with all the mayors in the valley and three surveys (of inhabitants, pilgrims and tourists). The organisation of an International Seminar about the Camino Mozárabe facilitated the dissemination and discussion of the results (Guil Soriano et al., 2020).

The pilgrimage routes to Santiago de Compostela depend on complex cooperative relationships between a multitude of public and private actors. A large supra-local project needs the concerted and continuous action of partners and volunteers, coordinated by associations and administrations at different levels. Since the 1990s, Camino Associations (*Asociación Jacobea*) have been set up in all the provinces of Andalusia, and have taken on a variety of tasks in promoting the pilgrimage routes, such as signposting, setting up a network of pilgrims' hostels, preserving cultural heritage, maintaining infrastructure, establishing contacts with public institutions, advising pilgrims, spreading information and holding conferences (Fuentes Mesa, 2020).

One of the premises of the European LEADER initiative is the cooperation between LAGs in different territories. From 2010 to 2013, the Camino Mozárabe de Santiago Inter-territorial Cooperation Project was launched with the participation of 13 LAGs from 6 provinces of Andalusia and Extremadura (Ortiz Oliva, 2020). The pilgrimage route was restored and signposted. Once this work had been completed, the responsibility for ensuring the continuity of the project was passed on to the associations and the public institutions in the different areas along the route. The most recent LEADER programming period (2014–2022) includes new projects relating to improvements of different kinds in the Camino Mozárabe.

A joint initiative by the Alpujarra Sierra Nevada de Almería LAG and the Asociación Jacobea de Almería-Granada (2022), to organise and promote the Camino Mozárabe in cooperation with some town councils and with the help of volunteers, gave the project a great boost. The route links the coastal area with the hinterland and encourages inter-municipal cooperation. Pilgrims generally follow the route between Almería and Granada in 9 to 11 stages and find accommodation in the villages along the way (Fig. 3). The number of hostels founded and maintained by the Association has increased. They also operate a homepage and update a wide range of information for pilgrims on a monthly basis. Due to the great contrasts and diversity of landscapes, colours, climate, gastronomy, etc. that pilgrims experience on these 200 km, the Camino Mozárabe from Almería to Granada has also become known as the “Way of the Senses” (Murillo Pravia, 2020). Ascending from the coast up to the highlands of Guadix, the route crosses irrigated fruit orchards, deserts, canyons and villages against the backdrop of snow-covered mountains, in a territory where the

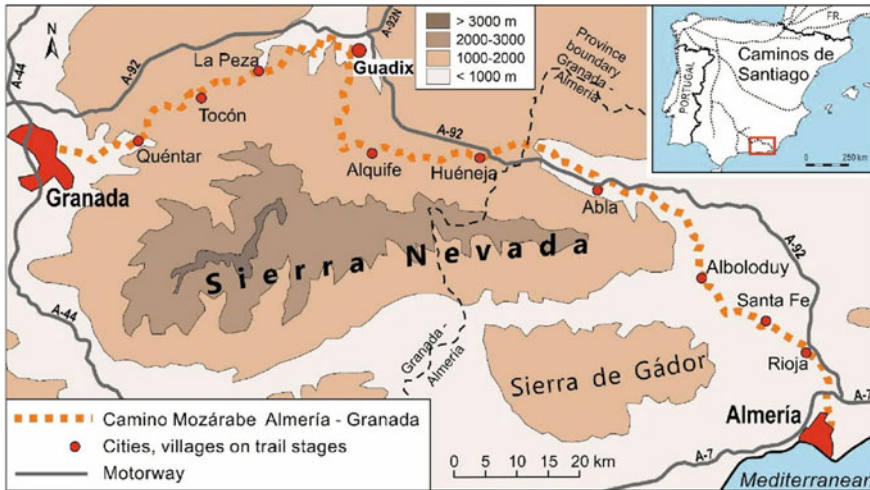


Fig. 3 Camino Mozárabe de Santiago: The pilgrimage route from Almería to Granada. *Source* Voth (2020), modified

disciples of St. James started to spread Christianity on the Iberian Peninsula in the first century.

The Asociación Jacobea Almería-Granada, founded in 2014, plays a central role in the coordination of activities and different forms of collaboration with town councils, private entities and social groups in the villages. Many events are held to encourage the participation of local people, including the “*Mozarito*” project, an educational campaign aimed at children with the cooperation of schools (Murillo Pravia, 2020). In some cases, the Association cooperates more easily with institutions in other regions than within the province of Almería. Initially, larger towns and cities were less willing to cooperate than small municipalities. Local parishes showed more interest in the pilgrimage route than those at higher levels within the diocese. Public administrations in the city of Almería have yet to appreciate the benefits of belonging to the network of pilgrimage routes. Cooperation between the small municipalities and the public institutions in the cities is still a weak point in the revitalisation of the Camino and other rural development projects. There is insufficient communication and coordination, even between departments working in tourism and culture. The different levels of the administration should be encouraged to communicate with each other better within the context of the promotion of the Camino and its integration into tourist destination concepts. Unfortunately, successful cooperation often depends on relations between specific individuals, and changes in the politicians responsible for managing these projects can be a factor of uncertainty in the process of reviving the Camino. The long-term success of this pilgrimage route depends very much on the awareness and participation of the population and the continued cooperation of a large number of institutions and people on several levels (Fig. 4).

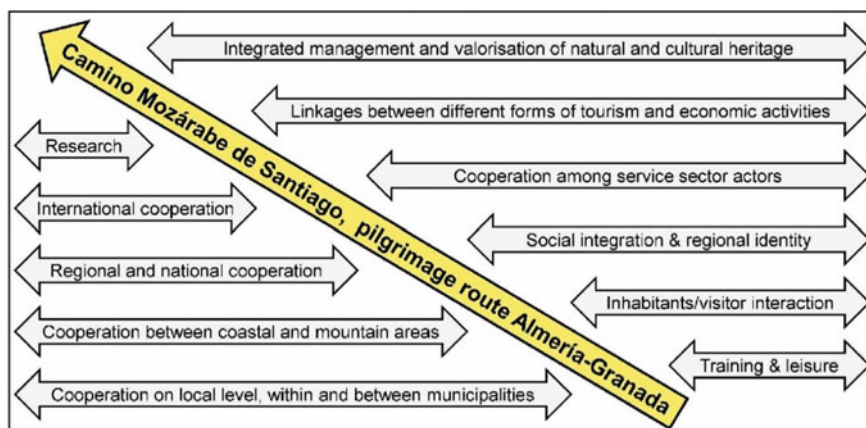


Fig. 4 Pilgrimage route as a space for territorial cooperation. *Source* Guil Soriano and Voth (2018), modified

The Camino Mozárabe has become a fundamental element in the development of the small rural municipalities, offering an opportunity to boost sustainable tourism and to make the legacy of local culture visible to pilgrims from all over the world. Many visitors come to Almería for the first time thanks to the pilgrimage route and get to know the Alpujarra. Many of them return—as pilgrims or as tourists. The demand from the increasing number of visitors helps ensure the maintenance of services that are also important for local residents (Guil Soriano & Voth, 2021). The Camino opens up new perspectives for development in the Nacimiento Valley and many positive effects have already been detected (Table 4).

Several characteristics of the Camino Mozárabe demonstrate its importance for sustainable tourism and rural development in the Alpujarra of Almería:

- The geographical location, climate and landscapes of the Camino Mozárabe between Almería and Granada are very different from those of the pilgrimage routes in other regions. Beginning the pilgrimage from the south has its own particular attractions (unique selling points).
- The route connects Almería with the historical cities of Guadix, Granada and Córdoba, attractive centres of cultural tourism.
- Bordering on several protected areas, the route allows close contacts with nature.
- The Camino Mozárabe helps reduce the concentration of tourism in space and time. Most pilgrims walk this route in spring and autumn, making it complementary to the seasonal peaks of tourism in the beach resorts of Almería and on the main pilgrimage routes in the north of Spain in the summer months.

The surveys confirmed that in general people have very positive perceptions of the Camino Mozárabe. It enables more people to discover the “unknown Alpujarra” of Almería. Pilgrims transmit the image of a slow tourism destination. At different levels, the interest of private and public actors in the Camino Mozárabe

Table 4 Positive effects of the pilgrimage route on rural development

General effects	On tourism	At an institutional level
Increased demand for local services and sales in shops	Increase in accommodation capacity and occupancy rate	Cooperation at different administrative levels
Boost to the creation of new businesses and jobs	Reduction of spatial concentration and seasonality	Exchange with different counties
Opportunities for complementary activities	International character of the pilgrimage, diversity of origin	More cooperation between small municipalities
Positive local perception of the arrival of pilgrims	Range of different attractions and options to create combined tourism packages	Cooperation of public bodies and local actors
Cultural exchange, contacts and innovative ideas	A more varied, balanced range of services	New forms of governance and participation
Valorisation and enhancement of heritage resources	External and internal marketing and image effects	Integration of villages into marketing concepts
Raising public awareness of local heritage	High level of satisfaction of pilgrims and other tourists	A line connecting the coast and the hinterland

Source Voth (2020), modified

is increasing, as is its acceptance amongst the local population. However, the benefits of the pilgrimage route for rural development are not immediately visible and are more likely to appear in the medium and long terms. This makes it difficult to raise awareness at the beginning of the process. The continuity of broad social and political support for the project and the consolidation of a culture of cooperation are essential factors. The fact that this is a common, shared project helps to avoid individualism and competition between municipalities, encouraging them to cooperate and opening up prospects for tourism development along the River Nacimiento corridor, connecting the lower and upper parts of the valley and strengthening linkages between coastal and mountain areas (Fig. 5). Furthermore, the linkages created by the Camino could boost research activities in the municipalities along the route. The route and its integration into the set of heritage resources of the Alpujarra of Almería can build bridges for rural development (Guil Soriano & Voth, 2021).

The pilgrimage route connects the Alpujarra at a local level with its broader international context. In order to provide a platform for the exchange of practical experiences and research approaches, an International Seminar on the Camino Mozárabe was held in Alboloduy in October 2018. It was organised by the Alboloduy Town Council and the Asociación Jacobea de Almería-Granada Camino Mozárabe, in cooperation with the RWTH Aachen University. People from different regions of Spain and other European countries participated in the seminar: Pilgrims, *hospitales* (volunteer managers of pilgrim hostels), scientists from different disciplines, representatives of various associations and public institutions, as well as inhabitants of Alboloduy and other villages in the Alpujarra. The International Seminar



Fig. 5 Camino Mozárabe: A new way of linking the villages in the Nacimiento Valley. *Source* The author

highlighted the importance of cooperation and coordination between municipalities, different social groups in each locality, and public administrations. The Camino Mozárabe demonstrates how the reactivation of the Pilgrim’s Routes to Santiago can help improve communication and exchange between the towns and villages along the way. The municipality of Alboloduy is an example of a particularly dynamic implementation of this project (Table 5).

Table 5 Activities carried out by the municipality of Alboloduy in relation to the Camino Mozárabe

(1) Preparation, maintenance, signposting of paths, raising of environmental awareness	(a) Volunteer days on the Camino (2007, 2011, 2013)
	(b) Ongoing annual maintenance of the trail, since 2014
	(c) Periodic checking of sections at risk of erosion
	(d) Upgrading of the village (signs, shell of St. James, etc.)

(continued)

Table 5 (continued)

(2) Basic services for pilgrims	(a) Pilgrim's area in the rural hostel of Alboloduy
	(b) Local hospitality businesses, welcome network
	(c) Digital communication services: Guadalinfo Centre
	(d) Pilgrim's hostel in the old Casa Médica (2018)
(3) Information and awareness-raising on the Camino Mozárabe and the pilgrims	(a) Awareness-raising campaign (2009)
	(b) Periodic annual information, festival magazine (2009)
	(c) Information days on the Camino (2010)
	(d) Days of the Camino Mozárabe in Alboloduy (2015)
(4) Promotion of the Camino Mozárabe	(a) Room devoted to the Camino Mozárabe in the Territorial Interpretation Centre in Alboloduy (2016)
	(b) Mozarito Project, aimed at primary school pupils
	(c) Awards of the Camino Mozárabe in Alboloduy
	(d) Camino Mozárabe gastronomic days (2018, 2019)
(5) Research on the Camino Mozárabe	(a) Project "Rural development and tourism in the Río Nacimiento corridor" (2018–2019)
	(b) Conference on the "Camino in Alboloduy" (2018)
	(c) International Seminar on the Camino Mozárabe (2018)
	(d) Presentation of research results at conferences
(6) Cooperation	(a) Teams of volunteers, local actors
	(b) Association Granada-Almería Camino Mozárabe
	(c) Cooperation between different public institutions
	(d) Cooperation between municipalities and provinces
	(e) RWTH Aachen University, Geography Department

Source (Guil Soriano, 2020; Guil Soriano & Voth, 2021)

7 The Continuity of Rural Development Processes and Research

In 2018, the municipality of Alboloduy held the first gastronomic event about the “Flavours of the Camino Mozárabe”. Numerous restaurants between Almería and the upper Nacimiento Valley presented their dishes. The collaboration of local actors along the Camino Mozárabe continued. A sequence of many small projects and local initiatives strengthens cohesion and helps consolidate a culture of cooperation.

In order to continue with the research activities of previous years, and due to the celebration of Almería as the Gastronomic Capital of Spain in 2019, a group of geography students from the RWTH Aachen University decided to study the inter-relationship between gastronomy, tourism and rural development processes. They chose the food production chain as a framework for their research, which took them to both the rural municipalities of the Alpujarra and the city of Almería. For a long time, Almería has remained almost unknown as a destination for food tourism despite the province’s rich culinary culture and the high potential of gastronomy as a tourism resource. The historic isolation of Almería, and of its mountain valleys in particular, has favoured the survival of local agro-food products and culinary traditions that today form part of its cultural heritage. Unfortunately, the Gastronomic Capital celebrations were focused above all on the city and not enough was done to promote the local gastronomic culture of the hinterland.

The municipality of Alboloduy has set up an exhibition on the diverse geology of this part of the Alpujarra, as part of its Territorial Interpretation Centre (Yáñez Jerónimo & Voth, 2019). The rich georesources and the vestiges of mining along the axis between Almería and Guadix, which were the subject of another study in 2022, could have significant potential for promoting geotourism. Scientific tourism could also be developed. In this area between two famous geoparks (Cabo de Gata and Geoparque de Granada), continuous efforts in research and multi-level cooperation are needed to explore this heritage and enhance its value for tourism. In rural development and the promotion of natural and cultural heritage for tourism, small communities in particular are reliant on networking and on the support provided by scientific research. New efforts should therefore be made to develop cooperation between rural development actors and research institutes in the region.

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European LEADER Programme (2014–2022) and Local Action for Territorial Development: The Paradox of Innovation



Guillaume Lacquement and Pascal Chevalier 

Abstract In this chapter, the LEADER approach is analysed from the perspective of the different forms of local public action in support of territorial innovation. Instead of focusing on economic competitiveness, the LEADER approach seeks to promote innovation through the dissemination of new techniques or new production and service processes (technological innovation). Innovation also takes the form of new ways of organization and functioning of the economy (social innovation), and new ways of using or consuming a product or service (innovation in use). These three forms of innovation form the frame of reference for the LEADER approach, a frame of reference established by public policy with the intention of creating added value in public action in support of territorial development. In general, the LEADER approach is intended as a source and stimulator of multiple experiments and innovative solutions for the rural environment, in terms of both method and action. As part of a detailed analysis of the coordination of local action in support of territorial innovation, in this research we carried out a case study based on the evaluation of projects financed by the LEADER programme in two Local Action Groups (LAGs): The Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée, located in Roussillon, and the Pays Cœur d’Hérault, in the hinterland of Montpellier. The study focused on identifying the innovation processes at work in a total of 251 projects using a common assessment grid for both LAGs, the creation of a database with the characteristics of each project, and statistical and cartographic processing.

Keywords Rural areas · Innovation · LEADER · Local development · France · European Union

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1 Introduction

This article offers a geographical analysis of the application of the European LEADER rural development programme in its role as a public policy instrument aimed at stimulating territorial development through innovation. Territorial innovation is distinguished by the capacity of local societies to formulate projects and to identify and enhance the value of new economic resources conducive to the adaptation and renovation of local economies and their insertion in the global economy (Aydalot, 1985; Camagni, 2006; Crevoisier, 2006; Fontan et al., 2004; Kebir & Crevoisier, 2004; Lacquement & Chevalier, 2020). This interpretation of innovation within a territorial framework leads us to consider the existence of territorial capital (Camagni, 2006). This takes the form of a model that makes the most of the capacity of local societies to convert geographical and relational proximity into a network of cooperation between partners and harnesses the tangible and intangible resources of the local territory to create new sources of income and enhance their value (Camagni & Capello, 2013). Envisaged as a social and territorial construct, the innovation process is sensitive to the effects of geographical context that differentiate the ways in which the stakeholders involved in the economic development and management of the territories coordinate their efforts and form networks (Fontan et al., 2004).

The LEADER programme forms part of the public policies that encourage the emergence of local action systems aimed at promoting endogenous initiatives for the socioeconomic development and integration of rural areas (Lacquement & Chevalier, 2020). It introduces a new form of territorial governance (Leloup et al., 2005), in which local actors are invited to prospect for alternative resources and enhance their value in a bid to diversify the rural economy (Gumuchian & Pecqueur, 2007; Lacquement & Chevalier, 2019; Laidin & Berriet-Sollic, 2022; Pecqueur & Peyrache-Gadeau, 2004). Innovation is at the root of political action at a local level, by bringing together the stakeholders representative of rural society and engaging them in a prospective, participative process (Chevalier, 2014; Dargan & Shucksmith, 2008; Maurel et al., 2014). The composition and functioning of the cooperation networks in the LEADER programme (Local Action Groups or LAGs) shape both the management of endogenous initiatives and the content of development projects (Lacquement & Chevalier, 2016; Opria et al., 2021). The application of public policy assumes that local actors can take advantage of this frame of reference to design a development strategy aimed at the adaptation of the production-based economy. The implementation of the strategy then requires coordinated, concerted action in the search for, identification and enhancement of alternative resources with the goal of creating business activity and employment.

In this way, the LEADER approach calls into question the forms of local public action in favour of territorial innovation. More than economic competitiveness, what the LEADER approach is really seeking is to encourage innovation via the dissemination of new techniques and new processes for producing goods or providing services (technological innovation), new forms of organization and functioning of

the economy (social innovation) and new ways of using or consuming a product or service (innovation in use). These three forms of innovation have become a frame of reference for the LEADER approach, a benchmark established by government policy in order to create added value in public territorial development action. More broadly speaking, the essential objective of the LEADER approach is to encourage the emergence of a wide range of experiments and novel solutions for rural areas in terms of both methods and actions.

Our investigation of the coordination of local action in support of territorial innovation was based on a comparative case study. This was applied to the analysis of the strategies of two LAGs (Local Action Groups), namely the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranéenne LAG, based in Roussillon, and the Cœur d’Hérault, based in Languedoc. We also sought to analyse how the application of these strategies has influenced the dissemination of innovation in the areas concerned. To this end, we analysed 251 projects carried out by the two LAGs over the course of the 2014–2020 programming period, which in the end was extended to 2022 due to the health crisis produced by COVID-19. For each project, there is an information sheet specifying the name, the total amount involved (including the part from LEADER funds), the project promoters, the territorial resources mobilized, and the jobs likely to be created. Together, these information sheets form a dataset from which the various forms of innovation that the projects seek to promote (social innovation, innovation in use or technological innovation) can be interpreted. Multivariate statistical analysis techniques and map production were then used to characterize the innovation, the way it is conceived by the LAG, the way it is produced by local initiative and the way it is disseminated across the local territory.

2 Territorial Innovation as a Paradigm for Public Development Action

Territorial innovation involves the transformation of public action to improve the well-being of the population and the development of local territories. This has become a paradigm for public policies in this direction. Within the LEADER programme, territorial innovation is conceived as a frame of reference for public development action, a framework that is based on the theories of the institutionalist school of economic thought.

2.1 Territorial Capital and the Innovative Environment: Perspectives from Which to Analyse Territorial Innovation

In order to analyse the territorial framework for innovation within which the LEADER programme is applied, in this geographical study we develop the concept of *territorial capital* (Camagni, 2006). This is a broad concept that encompasses the ways in which the three dimensions that make up territorial development are applied and developed (Lacquement & Chevalier, 2016). The partnerships or cooperation networks for *local governance* (first dimension) (Leloup et al., 2005) function on the basis of a system of relationships based on proximity (Bouba-Olga et al., 2008; Torre, 2009; Torre & Filippi, 2005), which together form *social capital* (second dimension) (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1985; Lin, 1995; Loudiyi et al., 2008). This system carries out actions aimed at improving the integration of the local economy into the market in a bid to create *localized externalities* (third dimension) (Courlet, 2008; Courlet & Pecqueur, 2013; Gumuchian & Pecqueur, 2007; Pecqueur & Peyrache-Gadeau, 2004). Constituted in this way, *territorial capital* provides a basis for the economic competitiveness of a given territory (Camagni & Capello, 2013).

Territorial development can also be understood as the successful result of an innovative local society (Aydalot, 1985). It is this idea of an *innovative milieu* that gives endogenous development its spatialized status (Crevoisier, 2006). Innovation arises firstly from *savoir-faire*, the technical and economic dimension of development. It can also be the product of good organization, in other words, the capacity of local actors to coordinate their actions effectively within a network. The social context falls within a geographical context, made up of both distances and proximities, but also of competition and complementarity. According to the analytical hypothesis, endogenous potential is a source of innovation that has been conceptualized in many different ways and has progressively helped construct the link with territorial capital (Camagni & Maillat, 2006). This concept can also be viewed from a theoretical perspective and, within the field of social science, presents a major challenge in terms of its transposition to geographical analysis. The latter focuses on the interplay between social actors, their representations and practices, in a bid to understand the location and the spatial dissemination of innovation processes, while considering the effects in terms of geographical context produced by the diversity of spatial configurations (population and density structures, situations of proximity, of distance and of accessibility, types of production and service activities, ways and degrees of integrating these business activities into the global economy, etc.).

2.2 *The Concepts Put into Practice in Public Action: The LEADER Framework for Territorial Innovation*

The LEADER programme used the concept of territorial capital for the purposes of implementing public policy. The LEADER approach assumes in effect the setting-up of a Local Action Group or LAG made up of representative members of local society (first dimension). The LAG covers a clearly delimited area for action and engages in a process of dialogue and consultation with the goal of drawing up a development strategy (second dimension). The strategy therefore encompasses the selection of development projects arising from local initiatives, and enhancing the value of local resources (third dimension).¹ This approach, known as “bottom-up”, consists of creating and consolidating a capacity for action in support of economic development via the activation of *territorial capital*.² More than economic competitiveness, this process seeks to encourage innovation for the dissemination of new techniques or new processes for producing goods or providing services (technological innovation), new forms of organization and functioning of the economy (social innovation) and new ways of using or consuming a product or service (innovation in use).

These three forms of innovation form a frame of reference for the LEADER approach, a frame of reference established by public policy with the intention of creating added value in the practice of territorial development. The added value provided by LEADER lies above all in the integration of the socioeconomic development projects and actors into specific types of local governance, likely to stimulate cooperation, while also reinforcing the capacity for the dissemination and promotion of the programme and for territorial engineering from the perspective of the interdisciplinarity and efficacy of the projects (Lacquement & Chevalier, 2016, 2019; Laidin & Berriet-Sollic, 2022; Navarro et al., 2016; Opria et al., 2021). More broadly speaking, the essential objective of the LEADER approach is to enable the emergence of a wide range of experiments and novel solutions for rural areas in terms of both methods and actions.

2.3 *An Empirical Method and a Case Study for Analysing Territorial Innovation*

In order to analyse the manner in which local actors exploit this framework, we studied the ways in which local development action is coordinated, in other words, on the one hand the strategic development choices made by the LAGs and on the

¹ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (2006), *The LEADER approach: A basic guide, Fact Sheet*, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 128 p.

² LEADER European Observatory, *Territorial competitiveness. Creating a territorial development strategy in light of the LEADER experience, Rural Innovation*, Dossier n°6, Part 1, December 1999, 43 p. <http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leader2/rural-fr/biblio/compet/competitivite.pdf>.

other, the development projects as seen from the perspective of the project promoters and the territorial resources they activate. To this end, we carried out a comparative case study of two LAGs in the Mediterranean Midi in France: The Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée LAG and the Cœur d'Hérault LAG.³

The Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée LAG was chosen for two main reasons (Fig. 1). Firstly, because of its dynamic programming activity as the LAG that carried out the largest number of LEADER projects in the former Languedoc-Roussillon region.⁴ Secondly, because of the strongly contrasting levels of socioeconomic development in this area, a fact that is particularly clear if we compare the municipalities near the big cities with those in the hinterland (Lacquement et al., 2020). These striking territorial contrasts make innovation and its conception and dissemination throughout the local territory a serious challenge.

The Cœur d'Hérault LAG was also chosen for two reasons. The first is related to the age of the LAG, one of the oldest and most stable in the former Languedoc-Roussillon region. It was created within the framework of the first LEADER programme in 1991 and has been active throughout all the subsequent programming periods. Its boundaries have remained almost unchanged for 30 years. The second relates to its varying territorial dynamics, in the form of significant urban development in the South (influenced by the Montpellier metropolis) and an evident process of abandonment (both demographic and economic) in the North in the foothills of the Massif Central.

This case study is based first and foremost on the LEADER development strategy applied by the two LAGs. To this end, we made a careful review of their programme documents in order to clarify how their support for innovation is delivered. This entailed the construction of a data matrix that categorized and characterized the projects programmed by the LAGs on the basis of a series of selected variables (type of project promoters, type of resources mobilized and type of innovations). This matrix enabled us to design and execute various cartographic projections of the LEADER approach via two statistical processes: a univariate process that produced a descriptive map and a multivariate process that provided an analytical cartography based on typological interpretations.

³ These two LAGs are part of the 14 Local Action Groups operating in the former Languedoc-Roussillon region over the programming period 2014–2022. They are considered a *Pays* or region pursuant to the LOADDT (*Loi d'Orientation pour l'Aménagement et le Développement Durable du Territoire* - Law setting down the Guidelines for the Management and Sustainable Development of the Territory) of 1999. The Pyrénées Méditerranée LAG is situated in Roussillon and is made up of the four southernmost communities of municipalities in the Pyrénées Orientales Department. The Cœur d'Hérault LAG is situated in Languedoc and encompasses three communities of municipalities between Larzac and the Vallée d'Hérault.

⁴ The programming period began in 2014 within the framework of the Languedoc-Roussillon region before the application in 2015 of the regional reforms that created the Occitanie region by merging Languedoc-Roussillon with the Midi-Pyrénées region.

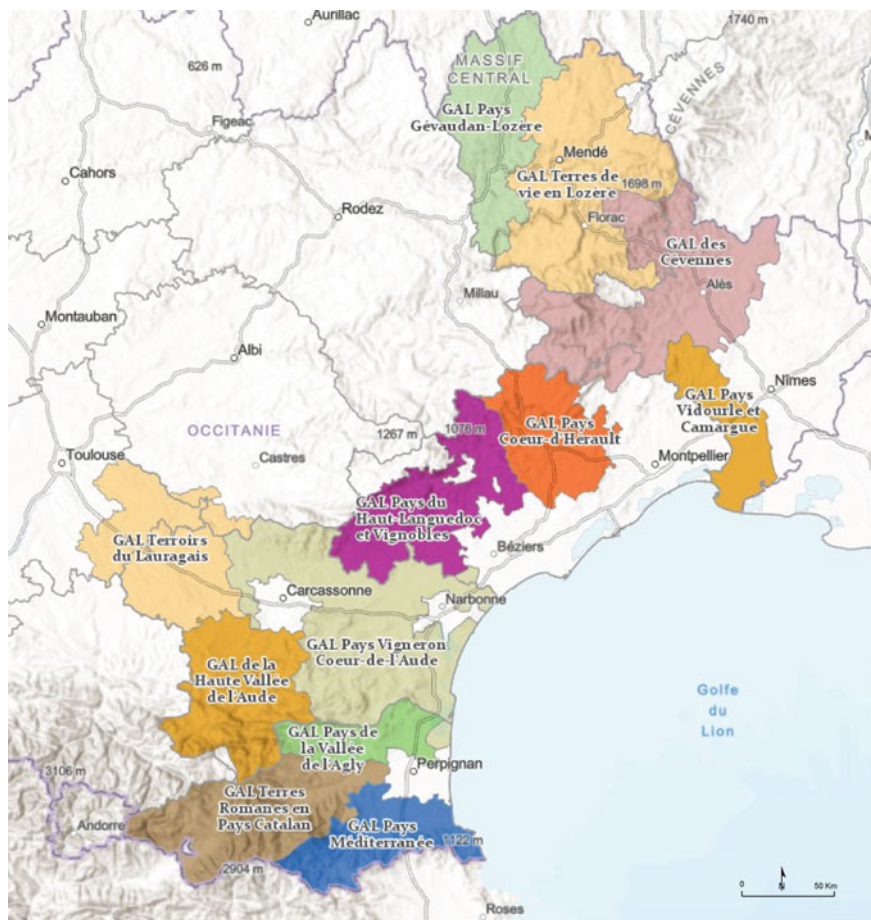


Fig. 1 LEADER programme (2014–2022) Local Action Groups (LAG) in the former region of Languedoc-Roussillon

3 Interpretation and Implementation of Territorial Innovation by Public Action

Once established as a frame of reference, innovation is interpreted by the LAGs over the course of the development action coordination process (Furmankiewicz et al., 2021; Lacquement & Chevalier, 2020). This process can be divided into three main stages. The first involves the drafting of the development strategy, which sets out the LAG's conception of innovation and how it can be harnessed to help achieve the LAG's objectives. In each project, support for innovation is determined by means of a project assessment grid, which awards points to the projects on the basis of a selective scoring system. Finally, the selection of the projects by the members of the

LAGs establishes the main lines of their development action, which are manifested in the contents of the projects.

3.1 Territorial Innovation and Development Strategies

The LEADER strategy 2014–2022 for the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée was drawn up on the basis of work involving the diagnosis, analysis and inventory of the projects that have been deployed since Spring 2013 within the framework of a bottom-up approach. This strategy affects a rural territory of 58 municipalities and 105,000 inhabitants, organized since 2001 in a *Pays* or province pursuant to the LOADDT (*la Loi d’Orientation pour l’Aménagement et le Développement Durable du Territoire*) of 1999. The strategy set out a major priority, namely “Dynamization of the local economy”, which manifests itself in three development axes and is based on the enhancement of local resources, products, savoir faire and heritage with the goal of creating private employment. This is sustained by the engagement in the process of the four communities of municipalities that make up the local territory and through cooperation with other areas in France and abroad. This programme document sets out the guidelines for territorial development selected by the LAGs. Based on the observation that the local economy had to a large extent been *tertiarized* by the development of tourism and that in spite of this, a productive economy based on the promotion of natural resources and local savoir faire still remained, the strategy established three main objectives: reviving the productive economy through local micro-sectors in niche markets; encouraging the consumption of local goods and services with short supply chains; diversifying the tourist sector and lengthening the tourist season by improving the quality of the products on offer.

In the same way, the LEADER strategy 2014–2022 for the Pays Cœur d’Hérault was drawn up on the basis of a participative diagnosis of the situation within the framework of a bottom-up approach in a rural territory made up of 78 municipalities and 180,000 inhabitants. The development challenges varied greatly from one geographical sector to the other. On the plateaux for example an important issue was how to maintain population levels and business activity, while on the plains by contrast the environmental problems associated with increased demographic pressure were proving difficult to handle. The top priority of this strategy is as follows: “an economy that creates sustainable wealth in the service of employment, social inclusion and the general public”. This strategy is presented in three strategic lines of action that revolve around the notion of sustainability: (i) *Innovation as a lever for growth and the creation of long-term employment*: this line of action engages the territory and its actors in a global process while basing itself on local sectors or micro-sectors (agriculture, agri-food, biodiversity, health, well-being, tourism, culture and creative professions, environment, sustainable building); (ii) *The ecological and energy transition, a key factor in reducing the consumption of scarce resources, and in social cohesion and economic development*—This anticipates the changes in practices and the adaptations that will be required and accompanies the socioeconomic actors on

the path towards this goal. The aim is to sustain and develop a local economy of green growth that creates permanent jobs and maintains the quality of local resources, with the ultimate objective of becoming a Territory for Positive Energy towards Green Growth (*Territoire à énergie positive pour la croissance verte*—TEPCV); (iii) *the enhancement and promotion of the resources and know-how of Cœur d'Hérault*. In this case, the aim of the LEADER strategy is to support the processes for the certification and recognition of local resources intended for the general public. The resources targeted in this way are extremely varied, ranging from large natural and cultural heritage sites to agricultural or craft products.

3.2 A Score System as an Operational Tool for the Assessment of Territorial Innovation

This conception of the way in which the local economy is integrated into the global system is based on an approach involving support for innovation. The degree of support for innovation is determined by means of a project evaluation grid. This estimates the level and the form of innovation and distinguishes between technological innovation, social innovation and innovation in use. In this case, the innovation evaluation refers explicitly to the principles of sustainable development. This grid is used by the Technical Committee, the LAG's expert advisory body, to examine the projects before presenting them to the Programming Committee, its decision-making body. This grid is operational in the sense that its purpose is to implement the LEADER framework. This arises from a process in which negotiation and decision-making are institutionalized via the adoption of norms and rules for action. During the course of the appraisal process, each project is awarded points on the basis of its estimated level of innovation and the different types of innovation involved. The assessment procedures are identical in the two LAGs. The level of innovation is evaluated using a scoring system, a technique from the marketing field. Similarly, during the drafting of the strategy, benchmarking, another marketing technique is applied. This highlights the fact that despite the bottom-up approach in which theoretically, each LAG could establish its own rules, in the end they all apply very similar procedures.

Social innovation entails new forms of organization and functioning of the economy in the production and services sector, and in particular in the social and solidarity economy. This is manifested for example in economic structures such as cooperatives, mutual societies, associations or foundations, whose functioning and activities are based on the principles of solidarity and social utility. This form of innovation aims to reconcile business activity and social equity. It may be associated with innovation in use, which involves bringing about a change in the way of using or consuming a product or service. One example is the circular economy, an economic system of exchange and production which, for all the different stages in the product life cycle (goods and services), aims to ensure more efficient use of resources and reduce the impact on the environment, while enhancing the well-being

of the individuals concerned. Social innovation and innovation in use stem in part from technological innovations, in other words from new techniques or methods for producing goods or providing services.

3.3 Innovation in the Selected Projects

In both LAGs, the forms of innovation promoted by the programmed projects are in line with the key principles of the respective strategies. In the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée, most of the funded projects (126 out of a total of 158) promote at least one of the three ways of innovation (social, use or technological). 51 projects combine two forms of innovation, and 12 combine all three. In the Pays Cœur d'Hérault, over 90% of the projects (189 out of 209) refer to at least one form of innovation and 43 display all three forms. In both areas, the project promoters seem to prioritize innovation in use.

This selection is the result of the institutionalization of the LEADER approach by the LAGs. The evaluation exercise produced a hierarchy in the distribution of the projects which can be characterized by describing the most significant examples and by analytical cartography.

In the Cœur d'Hérault LAG, the *ECOSUD* project obtained the maximum score in the evaluation, by mobilizing all three forms of innovation (technological, social and in use). This project was promoted by a company called CERES, a start-up incubator in Gignac. The promoters noted that over the course of recent decades, natural spaces and in particular water courses have suffered serious deterioration. The most visible consequences are floods, pollution and erosion. The aim was to try to improve the ecological condition of the natural spaces and water courses. To this end, CERES proposed to all local stakeholders (public bodies and collectives, nature associations and businesses specializing in river works) the local production of plants exclusively from samples taken from natural wetlands. The natural adaptation of these endemic plants would help improve the quality of the ecosystem in a sustainable manner. With a total funding of 92,823.58 €, LEADER targeted three complementary actions. The first involved the purchase of materials for the automatic regulation of the volume of water required to irrigate the greenhouses (hygrometric sensors, drip irrigation systems). The second entailed the installation of a “collaborative” IT platform, so enabling knowledge about the endemic plants (location, characteristics, etc.) to be shared amongst the inhabitants, collectives and businesses in the area. Finally, in partnership with *Etablissement d'Aide par le Travail* (ESAT), an organization helping handicapped people find work, the project helped create two protected jobs in the packaging of the plants and the management of stocks.

In the same way, the “Allpriv” project was selected by the LAG for its content in terms of technological innovation. Promoted by LEAL, a company located in Aniane, it enabled the creation of a miniature electronic device, installed with the relevant software, that provides nomad professionals with a simple, practical means of transporting sensitive IT data with full security. After filing patents, carrying out

market research, and presenting their new product in specialized trade fairs, the challenge for this business was to create a laboratory for hardware R&D. Thanks to the grants from the LEADER programme, it was able to purchase of the machines required to set up the laboratory. These machines enabled them to design printed circuits, and to place and fix the components on the contact points, so as to create new versions of circuit boards, testing new data protection designs and products. In addition, the company carries out 100% of its Research and Development activity locally in Aniane and has hired eight salaried employees, two of whom are highly qualified.

The LAG also selected the project promoted by the Beekeepers Syndicate of l'Hérault, who wanted to create a collective honey factory at their Agricultural College in Gignac. This project, which had a total budget of 61,699 euros allowed small and medium-sized amateur beekeepers to access honey extraction equipment (too expensive for individual beekeepers to buy) and provided them with a space in which to carry out this stage of the honey production process. More broadly speaking, it enabled the creation of a meeting place where beekeepers of all levels could exchange ideas and pool resources, so enabling them to form a network and develop a group. Training courses for professionals (rearing of queen bees), amateurs and the public in general were organized in order to raise local environmental awareness and spread information about issues such as biodiversity and pesticides. Apart from this technological innovation (the purchase of extraction equipment), the project also seeks to innovate in collective practices and ways of use.

For its part, the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée LAG for example selected a project promoted by the Albères Côte Vermeille Illibéris community of municipalities in support of the organization in Argelès-sur-Mer of the first trade fair for aromatic and medicinal plants in the Department of Pyrénées Orientales. The community of municipalities is using the new powers bestowed on it by a recent law⁵ to contribute to the development of an emerging economic sector. There are three main challenges: launching new products onto the market, structuring the broad network of businesses involved in the production, sale and marketing (social innovation), and reducing the amount of abandoned farmland by growing new plants (innovation in use). The project has taken form in a partnership between the Chamber of Agriculture of the Department of Pyrénées Orientales and the Agricultural Syndicate of producers of aromatic, medicinal and perfume plants. The fair was open to professionals, but also to secondary school students and the general public.

The *Tour Sainte Anne* is a project that was selected by the LAG for its content in terms of innovation. Promoted by the Canigou Grand Site Mixed Syndicate, this eco-tourism project involves the creation and implementation of a path for the discovery of Roman heritage in the Massif du Canigou. In this way, it is mutualizing (social innovation) the tools (technological innovation) amongst the mixed syndicate (whose headquarters are in Prades, a market town situated outside the Pays Méditerranée) and the seven municipalities affected by the path. Two of these villages, La Bastide and Saint Marsal, belong to the LAG and are situated on the southern slopes of

⁵ Loi NOTRe (New Territorial Organization of the Republic) of 2015.

the Canigou in the least densely populated, remotest areas of the Haut Vallespir community of municipalities. The project presents a fully integrated tourist product in the form of a basket of goods (innovation in use), which brings together many different providers (social innovation) engaged in the outdoor activities sector and in certified forms of tourist services (donkey-owners, accommodation providers, restaurateurs, *Bistrots de Pays* country restaurant association).

At the end of the programme, the Agriculture DURABLE TECHNOLOGIE (ADURATECH) project was submitted to the LAG by a local company that designs and manufactures prototypes for agricultural robots with the aim of modernizing farming methods and adapting them to the challenges of the ecological, energy and food transitions of today. The new robots, aimed in particular at market gardening, mechanize the work involved in soil preparation, weeding, hoeing and watering (technical innovation), so contributing to the preservation of natural resources and the transmission of local agricultural know-how. LEADER funding was used to buy machines for the factory and to develop the company website. Experiments involving students from technical and agricultural colleges were conducted in a test centre in Serralongue in the foothills of Albères.

The maps highlight, on the one hand, the diversity of the innovation-based initiatives and on the other the widespread dissemination of these initiatives across the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée region (Figs. 2 and 3). This situation can be better understood by breaking down the legend into six classes and by the importance of the classes that combine several types of innovation. The action of the LAG has led to the accumulation of projects, above all in the market towns in this region, the capitals of the communities of municipalities: Céret and Arles-sur-Tech, and then Thuir and Argelès-sur-Mer. Projects that do not promote at least one of the three forms of innovation are very rare. This distribution could also be compared with the geography of the programming, which shows that LEADER initiatives are polarized to a large extent in the market towns. This is due as much to the hierarchical territorial system, which causes the headquarters of the main institutions (*pays*, communities of municipalities) involved in the programme to be located in these towns, as to the agglomeration effects, which tend to densify the entrepreneurial fabric in the craft and retail sectors.

A similar distribution can be observed in the Cœur d'Hérault LAG. The projects selected on the basis of their contribution to the three forms of innovation also tend to be concentrated in the capital towns of the three communities of municipalities, Gignac, Clermont-l'Hérault and Lodève. This reinforces the polarizing power of these small towns, which already concentrate most of the economic and associative fabric in this area. For its part, innovation in use seems more evident in the projects located in the strongly touristic areas of the Haute Vallée de l'Hérault. In the sector of Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, classified as a Grand Site de France, eight projects out of ten are linked to the tourism and hospitality sector. These projects are implementing strategies to improve online reservation and marketing systems in a bid to attract an increasingly international clientele.

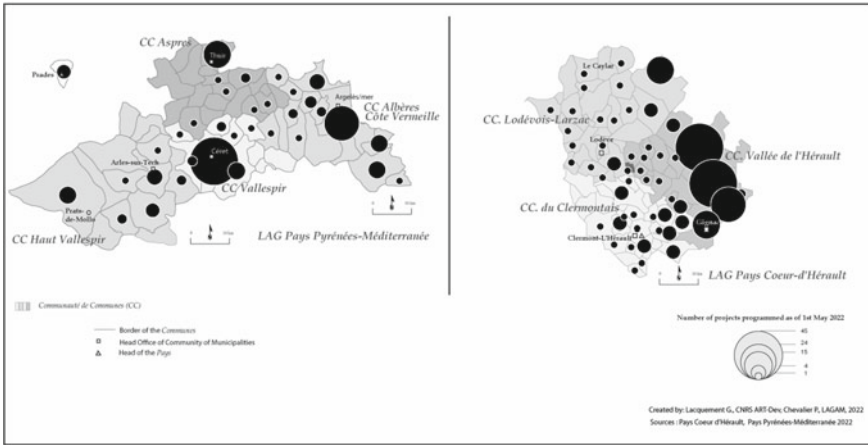


Fig. 2 LEADER programme (2014–2022) projects in the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée LAG and the Pays Cœur d’Hérault LAG

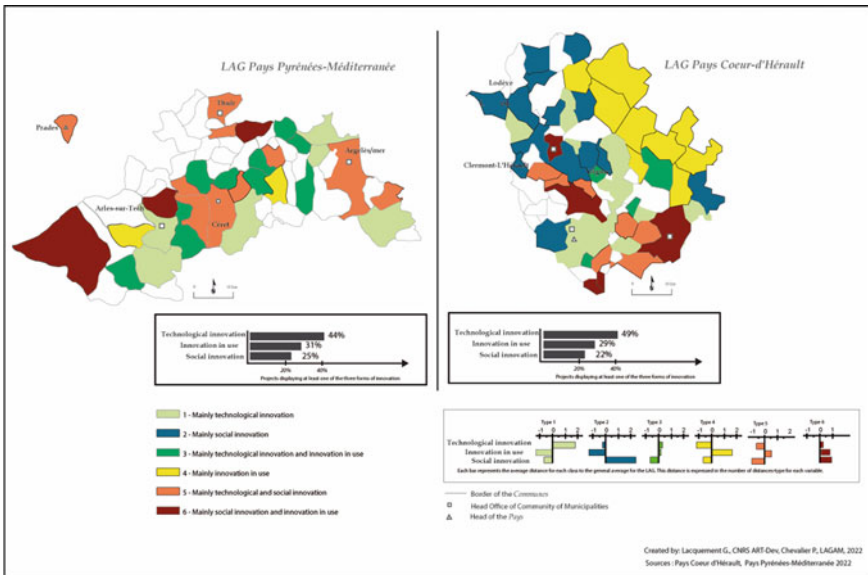


Fig. 3 Forms of innovation in the LEADER projects 2014–2022 selected by the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée LAG and the Pays Cœur d’Hérault LAG

Nevertheless, the fact that initiative is often concentrated in certain areas does not mean that the programming of innovation is homogeneous. Considerable variations can be observed according to the project promoters and the resources mobilized.

4 Local Action for Territorial Development and Innovation

Within the framework of the bottom-up approach, project programming supports local initiative which springs, on the one hand, from the involvement of the project promoters and on the other from the mobilization of local resources for the socio-economic development of the territory. The local initiative is then implemented by local innovation strategies, which vary according to the socioprofessional affiliation of the project promoters and the manner in which they mobilize territorial resources. The strategies contribute to the development of the local area by creating new socioeconomic activities. In this study, we used multivariate analysis and hierarchical ascendant classification to characterize, in the form of typologies, local support for innovation and to evaluate the knock-on effects on the development of local territory.

4.1 *Local Resources and Innovation*

Territorial resources have progressively emerged as key elements in territorial organization and local development. This stems from the idea that any given place can have varied potential sources for development which social initiative, once it has identified them, can mobilize and transform into market assets or sources of economic value (Gumuchian & Pecqueur, 2007). The production of rural resources is thus understood as an individual or collective process, which consists of drawing up an inventory of the different objects and attributes, tangible or intangible, of a given area, with a view to stimulating economic activity and employment (Lacquement & Raynal, 2013).

In the case of the LEADER programme, the work of the Local Action Groups is based specifically on diagnosis and inventory techniques. These are carried out prior to the different forms of enhancing the economy, for which they form the basis. These include the modernization of infrastructures, development of sociocultural facilities, creation of businesses or new branches of production, design of tourism products, etc. It is therefore up to the cooperation networks formed within the LAGs to extract from these rural areas the resources required for local development. To this end, the LAGs organize calls for projects and then select the most suitable by dividing them into categories that can be analysed according to the types of resources mobilized. The models in circulation in the organizations that provide information and professional training for rural development agents, such as the French Rural Network (*Réseau Rural Français*), distinguish three categories of resources: environmental resources (biodiversity, landscapes, quality of life), cultural resources (heritage, local knowledge, traditional know-how) and social resources (companies, business sectors, professional training, facilities and infrastructures). A basic principle of the LEADER approach is that territorial development can be boosted by the multisector enhancement of local resources. The multivariate statistical processing and cartographic projections show that the innovation content of the projects varies

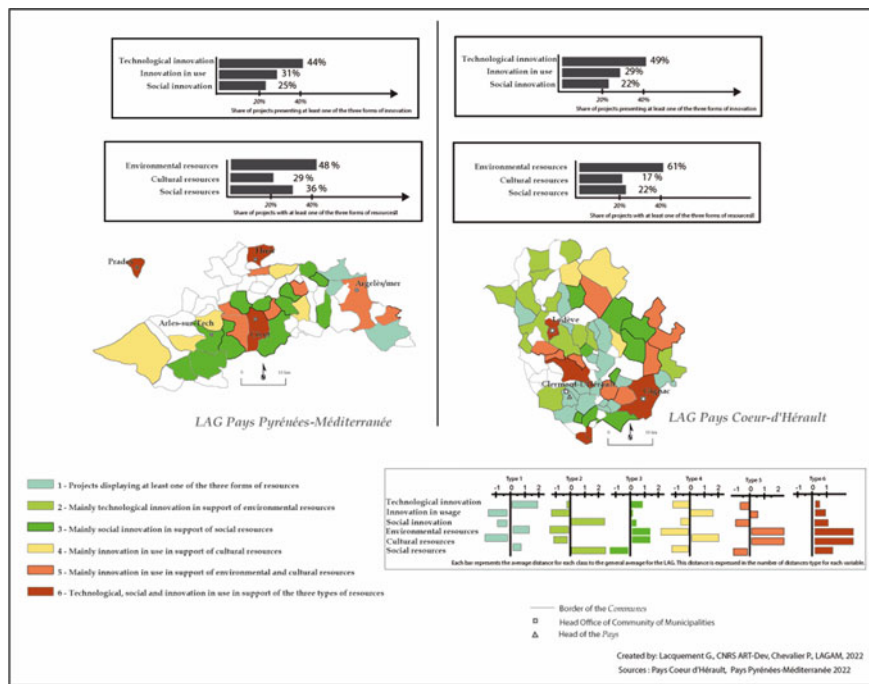


Fig. 4 Types of innovation and resources involved in the LEADER projects backed by the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée LAG and the Cœur d’Hérault LAG (2014–2022)

according to the potential resources of the territory, which are activated to a greater or lesser extent by the selection choices made by the LAG (Fig. 4).

In the same way in the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée LAG, technological innovation (Types 1 and 3) primarily concerns projects that enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the local territory through the creation or development of rural tourism businesses. Especially in municipalities in mid-mountain areas, innovation entails the conversion of the rural economy towards tourist services. The projects focus for example on the restoration of buildings as hotels or restaurants, the digitalization and/or modernization of reservation services, the creation of new products that help people discover architectural and cultural heritage, as well as hiking and outdoor sports. In numerous projects, innovation in use (types 4 and 5) is also associated with this process for the development of tourism resources. This is manifested in the design of projects that propose alternative forms of tourism, both in the sparsely populated, isolated mountain villages and in the more densely populated, tourist destinations on the coast. In this LAG, unlike in Pays Cœur d’Hérault, social innovation (type 2) makes no specific contribution to enhancing the value of local resources. On the contrary, it combines the other two forms of innovation in the many projects in which both associations and companies are involved in the modernization of collective infrastructures and amenities and/or in the creation of new business activities in

the production and/or services sectors. The selection of projects therefore reveals a potential for social resources, above all in the market towns of the region, such as Céret, Thuir and Prades.

4.2 Project Promoters and Innovation Strategies

The strategies drafted by the LAGs are committed to supporting innovation, but the project promoters adopt different strategies (Fig. 5).

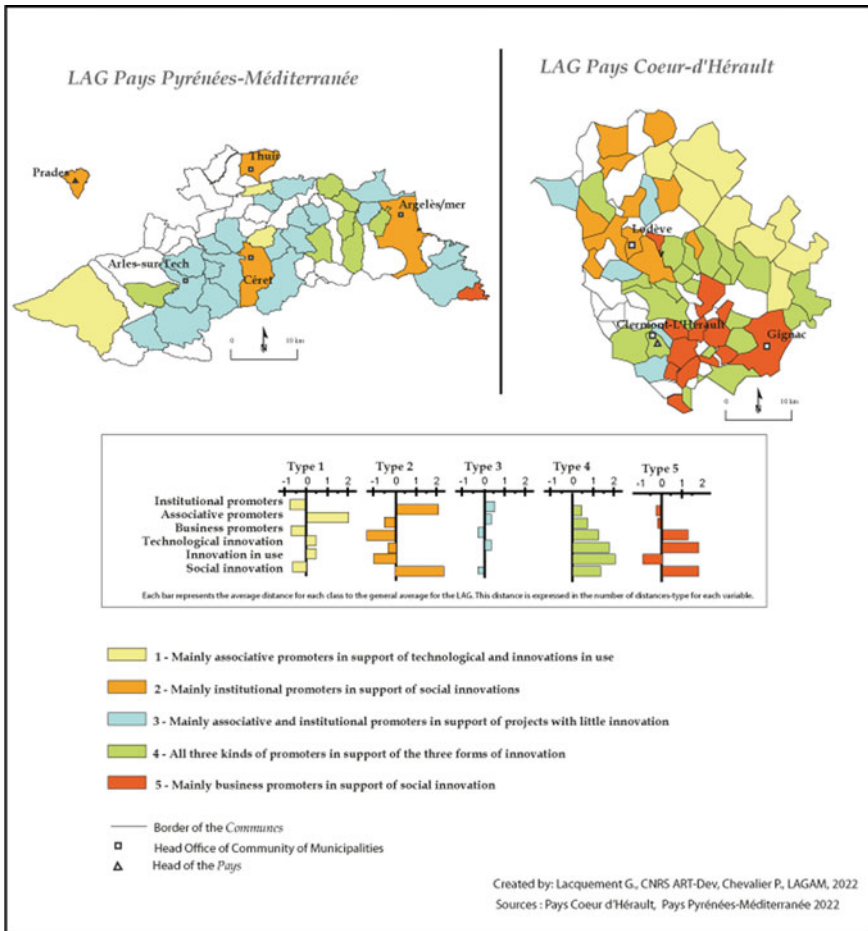


Fig. 5 Project promoters from the LEADER programme (2014–2022) and innovation strategies in the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée LAG and in the Pays Coeur d’Hérault LAG

In the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée LAG, the institutional promoters of projects (type 2) represent 54% of all project promoters. They dominate in market towns such as Céret, Thuir and Argelès-sur-Mer. Research indicates that project promoters are mainly Town Councils, Communities of Municipalities or Syndicates, while the nature of their projects shows the priority they give to public infrastructures. These projects mainly involve the construction of structural amenities (such as schools, stadiums or parks) and the layout of public spaces. In this case, local action prioritizes social innovation in that the institutions invest in projects that directly or indirectly support the development of new products, new services and above all new business sectors. However, many of the development or amenities projects promoted by institutions remain generic and hardly disseminate the different forms of innovation expected by the LEADER programme (type 3) across the territory.

The associative promoters represent just 28% of all project promoters. They are active above all in the villages in the mountains and foothills (type 1), and also in the municipalities on the Mediterranean coast (type 3). The residential appeal of these areas varies greatly, with the coastal and piedmont regions being especially popular. The new residents in turn breathe new life into the associations in the area. Many local associations realize how important the LEADER programme is and have made good use of it by applying for support for projects based on the enhancement of heritage, cultural and sporting resources. These associations have very strong local roots. They have forged many partnership links with the town councils, the communities of municipalities and the various local development structures such as the Pays d'Art et d'Histoire or the Canigou Grand Site Mixed Syndicate. As a result, they have acquired extensive experience in putting together project applications and actively participate in many local development initiatives, in a conscious attempt to preserve local identity. These project promoters prefer to harness all three forms of innovation, even if the result is incomplete or unbalanced and in the end the projects do not seem particularly innovative (type 3).

Companies represent 18% of project promoters. In most cases, the businesspeople who apply for grants from the LEADER programme are active members of the LAG and are involved in the drawing-up of the strategy. Most of them are the heads of small businesses (90% with less than ten employees). Three-quarters of them belong to the tourism, culture, local products and services sectors and a quarter to the craft sector. Deliberately oriented towards the diversification of the rural economy, these projects focus on the development of the social resources of the territory (know-how, local traditions) and on tourist investments (restoration of built heritage and the creation of guest rooms). In addition, companies tend to concentrate all local initiatives in support of innovation (type 4), in this way implementing the local strategy as conceived in the programming document. By choosing to invest in social innovation, the institutional promoters support initiatives from associations and companies that mobilize new techniques to develop new uses for products and services.

In the Cœur d'Hérault LAG, institutional project promoters represented just 21% of all project promoters. These were above all small town councils who applied for European funds almost exclusively to finance the enhancement of their environmental heritage. These municipal projects supported the diversification of local

products (niche, alternative or unconventional products), and also their differentiation by awarding them geographical origin or quality labels. For these municipalities, the creation of added value is expected to have beneficial knock-on effects on employment and income. This could be decisive in rural areas at risk of economic marginalization due to the disappearance of productive activities.

The majority of project promoters (55%) come from the associations sector. In general, their projects combine all kinds of territorial resources (environmental, social and cultural). As a result, LEADER action tends to focus on the restoration of village buildings and above all on investments in sociocultural services and amenities. They also promote projects in support of cultural heritage (local museums, discovery trails, and the restoration of proto-industrial heritage such as forges or tanneries), which are then executed by other territorial cooperation structures such as communities of municipalities.

The rest of the project promoters are businesspeople (just under 30% of the total). Their projects are distinguished by the fact that they try to integrate social resources. They take a global approach to activating the resources inventoried in the local area. This form of resource development is influenced by proximity to cities and tourist numbers. The main aim of these companies is to obtain income from urban and/or tourist customers by specific branding of local products and by promoting natural and cultural heritage.

4.3 What Are the Knock-On Effects on Territorial Development? the Paradox of Innovation!

Innovation strategies contribute a priori to the development of the local territory via the creation of new socioeconomic activities. They raise the question of the efficiency of public action and its knock-on effects on the development of local territories (Lacquement et al., 2020; Laidin & Berriet-Sollic, 2022; Lécuyer, 2022; Opria et al., 2021). It is true that the projects carried out by the LAGs have helped generate wealth and improve the living conditions of the local population via the creation of new products and services (Cejudo García et al., 2022). This dynamic leads in turn to the creation of new businesses and new jobs. In the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée LAG, the 173 LEADER projects supported the creation of 21 new businesses and 41 new jobs. The 243 projects funded by the LAG Cœur d'Hérault LAG created 51 new companies and 63 new jobs.

However, the multivariate statistical processing found no correlation between innovation in its different forms and the number of companies and jobs created. The projects identified as innovative by the management boards of the LAGs have no direct, specific or notable knock-on effects on the local development of socioeconomic activities (the correlation coefficient between the forms of innovation and the number of jobs created is 0.2 for the Cœur d'Hérault LAG and less than 0.15 for the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée LAG). The analysis reveals a paradox, the paradox of

innovation in general, or perhaps in this case the paradox of innovation as structured as a frame of reference and a standard for public action for territorial development. In fact, local action in support of innovation stems from a process of categorization, which occurs later on in the LEADER approach. This is mainly based on the way in which, by promoting projects, local actors take the initiative in identifying and developing local resources.

The graph (Fig. 6) produced by a new statistical analysis⁶ displays the different types of initiatives that sustain employment. The graph informs first of all about the way territorial resources are mobilized within the projects. The projects backed by the Cœur d'Hérault LAG activate the environmental, social and cultural resources of the territory in a much more integrated way than the projects of the Pyrénées Méditerranée LAG, which mainly combine cultural and environmental resources. The graph also shows that job creation varies in line with the resources being harnessed in each project. In the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée LAG, new jobs were created above all via the enhancement of cultural resources. In the Cœur d'Hérault LAG, all three types of resources acted as creators of employment and the most efficient evaluation was for environmental and social resources. Finally, the graph provides information on the role played by the different project promoters in job creation. In both LAGs, associations were the main promoters of job-creating projects. In the Cœur d'Hérault LAG, the initiatives proposed by associations were backed by a dense entrepreneurial fabric, which further strengthened the employment situation. By contrast, in the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée LAG, local authorities and institutions made up for the relative weakness of entrepreneurial initiative, by promoting projects and developing resources that supported job creation.

The results of this case study do not allow us to reach conclusions that can be generalized for all the LEADER groups in France. Nevertheless, they are representative and significant of the role that the organization of local space and the institutional context seem to play in the direction of public action. The LEADER approach stems from a complex mechanism whose operation combines three main elements that determine the forms of involvement of local actors in the cooperation network. The first refers to the length of time the LAG has been involved in local development initiatives. Although in theory, the LEADER programme offers local actors the chance to obtain new financial resources and to mobilize their capacity for action, in practice, it depends a great deal on the methods of engagement of rural communities, whose capacity for learning about the local development model is linked to their accumulated experience. More broadly speaking, the age and diversity of local development mechanisms enable the network to be structured and operated on a broader basis of

⁶ A Factorial Correspondence Analysis (FCA) was carried out on the whole set of projects from the two LAGs. This analysis associated the number of jobs created with the type of resources (social, environmental and cultural) mobilized by the project promoters. The first two axes of the graph (Fig. 6) explain 78% of the variance. A hierarchical ascendant classification (HAC) was then applied to the results in order to differentiate the projects according to the two criteria of types of resources mobilized and number of jobs created. In parallel, the projects were classified according to the project promoters by a hierarchical ascendant classification (HAC). The two classifications were then projected onto the same plane.

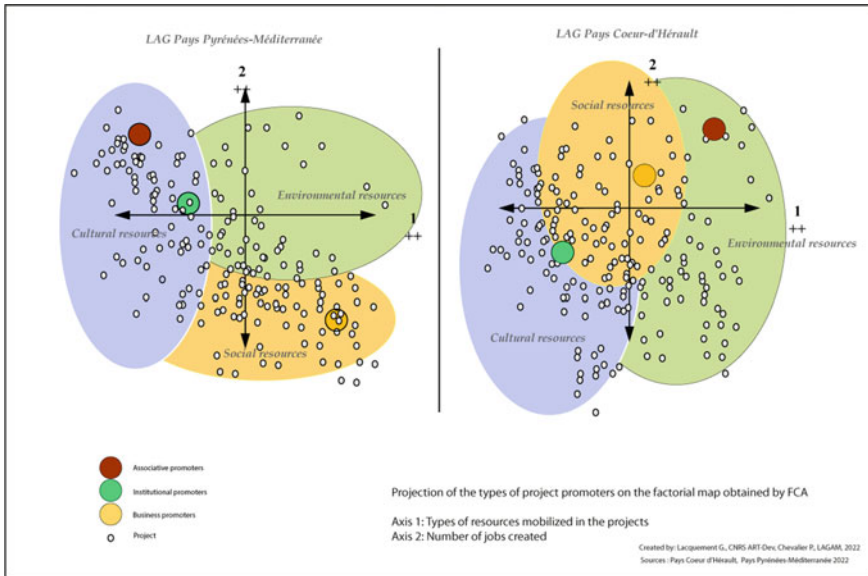


Fig. 6 Employment trends, territorial resources and project promoters

mutual knowledge and individual involvement. In the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée LAG, whose creation dates back to the year 2000, the involvement of civil society and the business community in the system is less marked than in the Cœur d'Hérault LAG, where it is bolstered by 30 years of LEADER programming.

The socioeconomic organization of the local space therefore plays a role in the form of public action: population densities, the distance between places, and the socioeconomic structure of the local territory influence the emergence of systems of actors likely to get involved in cooperation networks. The large, sparsely populated Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée LAG is made up of a large number of small local companies, whose socioeconomic dynamics are fragmented according to their location (valleys, mountains, etc.). This is exacerbated by the current economic crisis, which heightens the risk of marginalization of certain isolated municipalities. Conversely, the Cœur d'Hérault LAG area, which falls within the area of influence of the city of Montpellier, is very dynamic from a demographic and economic point of view. Under these conditions, the formation of partnerships makes it easier to encourage the participation of many more potential project leaders.

Finally, the LEADER mechanism is highly dependent on the *modus operandi* of the local action system, which can strongly polarize collective action around a small number of local actors. Given the rules within which their actions must be formulated, these actors are obliged to develop their learning capacities. Sometimes, this goes hand in hand with the roll-out of “informal spaces” for reinterpreting public policies and “avoidance strategies” (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). In the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée LAG, for example, Town Councils and other institutions who are strongly

engaged in the LAG network, take the place of associations and companies, who seem little inclined to take part in local development action. Conversely, in the Cœur d’Hérault LAG, the associative and entrepreneurial spheres, which are very active and above all well-structured, have gradually taken the lead.

5 Conclusion

This case study highlights specific ways of activating territorial capital in local development action. The Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée and Cœur d’Hérault LAGs have set up governance systems that contribute to the production and dissemination of innovation in the local area. The general aim of the development strategy and the programming procedure is to support local initiatives by targeting the resources that can be mobilized and the ways they can be used to help create businesses and jobs. The analysis of the projects according to their content and according to their promoters also revealed different ways of coordinating local action towards innovation for the socioeconomic development of the local area. The different innovation strategies were differentiated according to the project promoters and the resources identified for the creation of business activities.

However, this study has also revealed an interesting paradox, namely that innovation does not a priori create businesses and jobs. It is structured into categories (technological, use, social), which are taken into account in the selection of projects by the LAG management board. This consolidates and sustains an approach that is based above all on the initiative of the local actors and their capacity to promote projects that enhance the value of local resources. It is this initiative that creates businesses and jobs. The projects they promote could cover one or more forms of innovation, but their socioeconomic efficiency depends first and foremost on the way in which local actors identify and enhance the territorial resources likely to create new business activities. The socioeconomic results of the LEADER approach on the local territory are therefore not homogeneous. They are directly related with the capacity for initiative of local actors to promote networking and the identification of new resources. This depends heavily on localized learning and on the experience they have acquired over the years. This initiative then spreads across the local area in line with its spatial configuration and its territorial potential, which is expressed in terms of the location of market towns, the strongly varying densities of the entrepreneurial and/or associative fabric and institutional polarizations in specific places. The application of the LEADER programme is thus part of a localized, contextualized process.

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The Practice of Neo-Endogenous Rural Development in Extremadura (Spain): 2014–2020. A Case Study of La Vera, Valle del Jerte and Valle del Ambroz



Ana Nieto Masot  and Gema Cárdenas Alonso 

Abstract Although Extremadura (SW Spain) has been receiving European Rural Development aid since the LEADER programme was first launched in 1991, it is still considered a convergence objective region because its GDP is less than 75% of the European average. For this reason, it is important to analyse the territorial impact of rural development policy in this region, and in particular in those municipalities with worrying demographic and socioeconomic data, such as the mountainous areas in the north of the province of Cáceres. In this chapter, the situation in these areas is compared with other more encouraging cases, with municipalities whose population has doubled since 1990s. To this end, we focus on three historic *comarcas* (counties) in Extremadura (*Valle del Jerte*, *La Vera* and *Valle del Ambroz*) with extensive experience in rural development policy thanks to the work of their Local Action Groups. These three contrasting areas are analysed through interviews with members of the LAG technical teams and various quantitative data, so as to assess their problems, failures, results and good practices and thus be able to offer enlightening insights into the application of neo-endogenous rural development in these areas.

Keywords European union aids · LEADER programme · Local Action Group · Rural areas in crisis

1 Introduction

Ever since LEADER was first set up, it has been heralded as a radical new form of rural development policy due to its bottom-up, neo-endogenous approach (Navarro Valverde et al., 2018b) in which a wide range of stakeholders, such as the different tiers of administration, local businesspeople, the self-employed and third sector associations are involved in the management and decision-making process (Cárdenas Alonso & Nieto Masot, 2020), through the mechanism of Local Action Groups

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(LAGs) (Abad Aragón, 2014). These neo-endogenous rural development policies have been implemented in Extremadura for more than 30 years, first, with the LEADER Initiative and the PRODER Programme, and since 2007 as a line of action within the European Rural Development Policy (Nieto Masot & Cárdenas Alonso, 2017). Throughout these years, the objective of LEADER has been to develop new sources of income that can complement agriculture and turn the most disadvantaged rural areas into more attractive places to live and work. In this way, it can help curb depopulation and reduce the income gap with respect to urban areas (Dax & Fischer, 2018; Shucksmith, 2004).

LEADER has enabled a cultural change in the governance model based on the strengthening of the relationships between the different territorial actors, which goes far beyond the simple decentralization of decision-making, allowing the empowerment of local societies (Navarro Valverde et al., 2018a) which can determine their own development paths through the diversification of their economic activities (Alario Trigueros & Baraja Rodríguez, 2006; Farrell & Thirion, 2005).

For all these reasons, it is essential to evaluate the impact of public funding of this kind. Together with private capital, the projects subsidized by LEADER receive public funding from two levels of government administration: European, through the European Structural and Cohesion Funds (Nieto Masot et al., 2019; Segrelles Serrano, 2017), and national (in this case from the Spanish government). Demonstrating to society that the public resources invested are securing the right results is therefore vital for justifying the continuity of funding strategies such as LEADER, whose strength is demonstrated by the fact that it is the only rural development initiative whose management model has remained practically unchanged since 1991.

At an institutional level, LEADER, through all its various programming periods, has been subject to evaluation by the EU. These processes are currently ongoing through mechanisms that seek to control its proper functioning during the current programming period (Commission, 2017). The latest evaluations are being carried out primarily at regional level and focus on three main questions: (i) As part of the European rural development policy, how well is LEADER connected with other instruments of participatory local development financed with structural funds? (ii) To what extent has LEADER fulfilled EU, national and RDP objectives, and (iii) At a local level, can we identify successful projects that illustrate LEADER's contribution to rural development.

From a research perspective, LEADER has been assessed in numerous publications. These include classical evaluation studies that focused on analysing the management of the programme and basic indicators such as the funds invested in the projects, their successful execution or failure, and their results (Cárdenas Alonso & Nieto Masot, 2016; Nieto Masot & Cárdenas Alonso, 2015a). In other studies, indicators were created to analyse the impact of LEADER funding. These indicators were considered particularly useful as they could also be used as objective instruments for evaluating rural development programmes (Márquez & Foronda, 2005; Mondéjar Jiménez et al., 2007) and, as required by the European Commission, they could be applied in all LEADER territories.

Dargan and Schucksmith (2008), Dax et al. (2013) and Esparcia (2014) studied the role played by public and private actors in the development of their territories through innovation, one of the main objectives in the different stages of LEADER. Other studies have evaluated LEADER on the basis of the success of the projects it funded, finding out how many remain in business after the minimum period of operation (5 years) has come to an end. Although research of this kind is scarce, notable exceptions include the studies focused on investments in tourism in Extremadura by Engelmo Moriche et al., (2021a, 2021b), and those in regions of Granada (Andalusia) by Navarro et al. (2016), and in Alentejo (Portugal) by Neto et al. (2014). These authors used different approaches to analyse the survival of all the private companies created since the start of LEADER and concluded that demographic and socioeconomic factors play a key role in the survival (or not) over time of the subsidized projects. In recent years, various interesting studies have been made of the impact of LEADER in the tourism sector (Nieto Figueras et al., 2022; Soler Vaya & San - Martín González, 2023).

In this chapter, we aim to evaluate LEADER during the current programming period (which began 8 years ago in 2014) with the information available as of December 2022 and to find out, by comparing the results with those of previous studies (Cárdenas Alonso & Nieto Masot, 2017; Nieto Masot & Cárdenas Alonso, 2015b), whether LEADER is still a Rural Development Programme with few failed projects. To this end, we will be focusing on the *comarcas* (counties) of La Vera, Valle del Jerte and Valle del Ambroz (in the north of Extremadura), and analysing whether the success or failure of LEADER in these areas is related to the demographic and socioeconomic aspects that have been shown in previous studies to act as synergistic factors. The analysis has been approached from a dual perspective. On the one hand, quantitative, by analysing the number of projects that have finally been carried out (since, from the time the funding is requested until the project is actually executed, many are cancelled or abandoned), and, on the other hand, qualitative, via interviews with the managers of the LAGs in the selected counties, in order to find out what they believed were the reasons for the success or failure of the projects in their areas.

2 Methodology, Sources and Study Area

Extremadura is an ideal region for the analysis and evaluation of rural development policy in general, and the LEADER initiative in particular, for two main reasons. Firstly, because of the long history of the LEADER programme since it was established in 1991, and secondly because, in spite of the efforts made, Extremadura remains a predominantly rural region (over 50% of its population live in municipalities with less than 150 inhab/km²) with a difficult economic and demographic situation. For the current programming period (2014–2020), it is the only region in Spain with a GDP per capita of less than 75% of the EU average. It also has worrying ageing rates and the exodus from the country to the cities continues.

We will be focusing in particular on three *comarcas* or countries (Fig. 1). In terms of development, these are some of the most disadvantaged areas in Extremadura for various reasons. Firstly, their location in mountain areas with poor communications with the towns and cities where most of the job opportunities and the highest incomes are concentrated. Secondly, because of their low population. The three *comarcas* have a total of just 41,787 inhabitants in 38 municipalities, 26 of which have less than 1000 inhabitants. This means that 26% of the population is thinly distributed across 68% of the municipalities. 16 of these municipalities have less than 500 inhabitants. There are just two municipalities with a substantial population (Hervás with 4000 inhabitants is located in Valle del Ambroz, and Jaraíz de la Vera with 6500 inhabitants in La Vera). Finally, they score low values on a range of economic indicators. In 2020, according to data from the Spanish National Institute of Statistics, the average income per person was 9460 euros and per household 19,195 euros. Both figures have increased since 2015 (individual income by 14.37% and household by 9.26%). In Extremadura as a whole, the average income per person was 9431 euros and per household 20,269 euros, a rise of 20.61% per person and 16.8% per household compared to 2015. These increases are higher than those of the study area counties, where only one municipality has an average income of over 11,000 euros (Cuacos de Yuste in La Vera). By contrast, eight municipalities have average incomes of less than 8500 euros (the lowest are Rebollar with 6865 euros, and Piornal with 7569 euros, both in Valle del Jerte). The standard deviation is 1057 euros, as most of the municipalities have average incomes of between 9000 and 10,500 euros, but there are 12 municipalities with incomes of less than 9000 euros. In Extremadura as a whole, there is more disparity, in that various cities and nearby towns have average incomes of over 11,000 euros.

As regards population, the counties of La Vera, Valle del Jerte and Valle del Ambroz are among the rural areas of Extremadura that have suffered the smallest decline in population in the last decade (-7.84%). The average for rural municipalities (< 10,000 inhabitants) in Extremadura as a whole is 9.25%, while in the smallest villages (< 1000 inhabitants) population has slumped by 14.42%. The population decline in the study area is related to high ageing, with 29.77% of the population aged over 65 and an ageing index (% population over 65 divided by % population under 15) of 510.92%. These figures are higher than the Extremadura average (28.80% and 425.43%) (NSI, 2022). This means that it is important to locate the areas with the best demographic data and analyse their possible relationship with LEADER investments and success stories, in order to find an explanation for the serious problems suffered by the most ruralized areas and possible solutions.

In short, these territories follow the same declining population trend as the rest of Extremadura, although to a lesser extent than other mountain areas. It is thought that this is due, above all, to their efforts to develop rural tourism and to the strong agro-industrial sector in some of the municipalities. Both of these activities have been promoted by different rural development policies, including LEADER.

As mentioned earlier, we used a two-pronged methodology combining, firstly, quantitative (data from the three LAGs regarding projects and investments for the

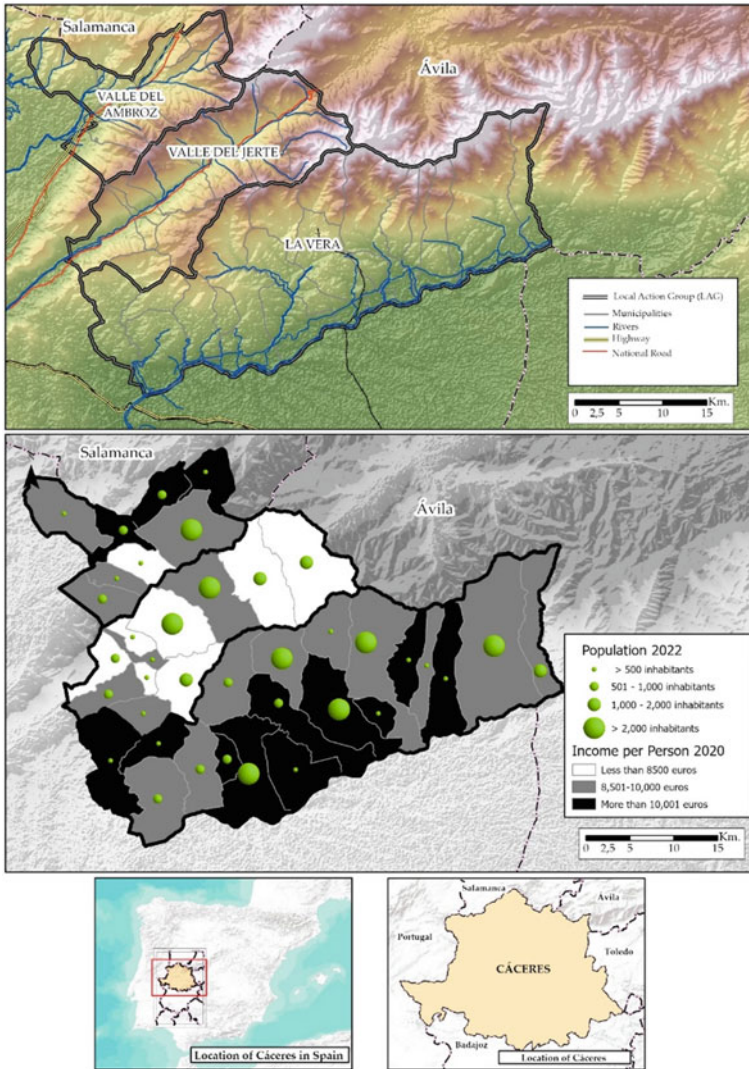


Fig. 1 Map of the study area and distribution of its population (2022) and income per person (2020). *Source* The authors—Based on NCB200 (National Cartographic Base 1:200,000) from GIS (Geographic Institute of Spain) and NIS (National Institute of Statistics)

current programming period until December 2022) and, secondly, qualitative techniques in the form of semi-structured interviews with members of the technical teams of the three LAGs. Specifically, the quantitative data referring to LEADER correspond to the project applications presented in the 2014–2020 programming period, although, as will be seen below, this was extended to 2022. The project information was provided by the Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Development, Population

Table 1 Information in the database of LEADER projects

Local action group
File number
Title
Sub-measure
Action
Municipalities
Approved/Rejected
Aid requested (euros)
Public investment
Private investment
Amount paid
Accepted investment
Date of payment
Project that creates business activity/jobs
Type of beneficiary
N° jobs maintained (men under 25 years old)
N° jobs maintained (men over 25 years old)
N° jobs created (men)
N° jobs maintained (women under 25 years old)
N° jobs maintained (women over 25 years old)
N° jobs created (women)
Type of project

and Territory of the Regional Government of Extremadura and a database with the following information was created (Table 1).

The data used here are for December 2022. At this point, it is important to clarify that the original 2014–2020 programming period had an expenditure eligibility deadline of 31/12/2023 (according to the “N + 3” budgetary mechanism). However, it was decided to extend the programming period to 2022 (according to EU Regulations). It has now been renamed as programming period 2014–2022 and the expenditure eligibility deadline has been extended until 31/12/2025. This research could therefore be considered as a midterm evaluation of the 2014–2022 programming period.

The second stage of our research involved semi-structured interviews with the technical teams of the three LAGs to learn first-hand about the functioning of LEADER, their perception of why some projects do not come to fruition and what the main causes were. In qualitative research, the interview is a very useful technique for gathering information (Canales Cerón, 2006) and is generally defined as a conversation that has a specific purpose other than simply conversing. Some argue that an interview can be more effective than a questionnaire, in that it provides more complete, in-depth information, as well as the possibility of clarifying any doubts that may arise during the process and ensuring more useful responses (Báez & De

Tudela, 2006). The interview offers numerous advantages, especially in descriptive studies and in the exploratory phases, as well as in the design of data collection, since it helps elicit detailed background information (Rivas Meza, 2006). Even so, it is normally a good idea to complement interviews with other techniques according to the specific nature of the research. In this case, we analysed LEADER data, such as the amount of funding, the number of projects and the territorial distribution of both, as well as the types of promoters and the main economic sectors in which the successfully executed projects were concentrated.

3 Results and Discussion

An analysis of the database shows that, as of 31 December 2022, the projects can be divided into three types, depending on their execution status. The three types are:

- **Fund Approved:** Projects that have been definitively approved in which both private and public funds are being invested. Most of the projects in this group belong to the first calls for LEADER grants, which were published in 2017 and were later followed by the 2021 calls.
- **Fund Rejected:** Projects which were provisionally granted LEADER aid but which did not comply with one of the obligations set out in the rules (execution must begin within 6 months, receipt of the grant must be publicized, separate accounting systems, etc.).
- **Execution Ongoing:** The applications for the projects in this group were made in the 2021 and 2022 calls, and they had received provisional approval for LEADER funding from the LAGs. At the time of writing, the promoters are justifying their first expenditure items from the budget. In these projects, the promoters must pay the bills themselves out of their own funds and only later receive the grant from LEADER. The LAGs have up to 18 months to give these projects their definitive approval (“favourable” status), after which the beneficiaries can start receiving subsidy payments.

The above indicates that many of the projects (that are finally subsidized) have to be implemented within a very short timeframe. It is also important to bear in mind that LEADER 2014–2020 underwent a series of changes due to the situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic. As mentioned above, the period has been renamed 2014–2022. The deadlines and schedules have also been affected, as the original budgets requested by the LAGs were designed for a shorter period.

3.1 *Projects for Which a Definitive Decision (Approval or Rejection) Has Been Issued*

3.1.1 *Approved Projects*

The ADICOVER (*La Vera*), SOPRODEVAJE (*Valle del Jerte*) and DIVA (*Valle del Ambroz*) LAGs have each received more than 8 million euros to date. In particular, ADICOVER received 8 million, DIVA 8.3 million and SOPRODEVAJE 8.7 million. The average for these three LAGs was 8.3 million euros, which is 10% higher than the average for all the LAGs in Extremadura, i.e. 7.5 million euros (Table 2). Private investment in the study area accounted for 41.91% of the total, which was slightly lower than the average for Extremadura as a whole. However, a notable exception was *Valle del Ambroz*, where private investment was almost 50%. This is a striking, quite optimistic statistic, in that, in this region, the economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic does not seem to have reduced the contributions made by private businesses, which have continued at similar levels to previous periods (Cárdenas Alonso & Nieto Masot, 2017). It is also important to highlight the high degree of execution of the approved projects, in that, as of 31 December 2022, 81.2% of the budgets for the approved projects had been executed, especially in *La Vera* and *Valle del Ambroz*. Another sign of the dynamism of the current programming period is that in most of the LAGs, the projects are being executed according to stable continuous timelines, unlike, for example, in the 2007–2013 programming period (Cárdenas and Nieto, 2020), when a large proportion of the spending was justified in the last two years. This distorted the operation of the programme, with costs varying greatly from one year to the next. It also meant that many projects were still underway when the programme came to an end.

As for the number of projects (Table 2), the same pattern is repeated in all three LAGs, which have all executed more projects than the Extremadura average (107). In this aspect, *Valle del Ambroz* stands out, followed by *Valle del Jerte*, with 169 and 160 projects, respectively. The average investment per project in the three groups was 56,348 euros, which was lower than the average for Extremadura as a whole (70,453 euros). This may be due to the fact that the three LAGs are in mountain areas in which investments have been made above all in rural tourism or in small and medium-sized companies in the agricultural sector. Although *La Vera* obtained worse results in terms of investment, number of projects, percentage of private participation, etc., its relatively high figure in investment per project (69,199 euros per project) can be interpreted as a good result in that on average each project affects a larger number of inhabitants and can, therefore, have a greater impact in terms of job creation.

Compared to, for example, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), LEADER is an initiative with a small budget, which finances projects of limited size (its rules stipulate a maximum grant of 200,000 euros for each project). Unfortunately, these limits can obstruct the development of interesting projects, especially in the most ruralized areas where, in addition, there are fewer large investors with sufficient capacity to put up the private contribution or to create large agribusinesses or companies. This

Table 2 Data on investments in the study area and Extremadura

	Aid requested (Euros)	Public investment (Euros)	Private investment (Euros)	Accepted investment (Euros)	Number of projects	Average investment per project
ADICOVER (La Vera)	8,027,036	4,838,078 (60.27%)	3,188,958 (39.73%)	6,707,126 (83.56%)	116	69,199
DIVA (Valle del Ambroz)	8,334,110	4,188,190 (50.25%)	4,145,919 (49.75%)	6,867,869 (82.41%)	169	49,314
SOPRODEVAJE (Valle del Jerte)	8,707,983	5,551,277 (63.75%)	3,156,706 (36.25%)	6,754,759 (77.57%)	160	54,425
Total for Extremadura	180,923,457	102,558,806	78,364,651	148,757,276	2560	70,673
Local Action Groups Average	8,356,376	4,859,182 (58.09%)	3,497,195 (41.91%)	6,776,585 (81.18%)	148	56,348
Average for Extremadura	7,538,477	4,273,284 (56.69%)	3,265,194 (43.31%)	6,198,220 (82.22%)	107	70,453

Programming period 2014–2022

is why in the short and medium terms, it seems unlikely that LEADER can by itself generate the socioeconomic dynamism required to mitigate or remedy the serious demographic problems suffered by the most disadvantaged rural areas.

As of 31 December 2022, the three groups had applied for funds totalling an average of 761 euros per inhabitant, with significant differences between them, in that the figure for *Valle del Ambroz* was 1112 euros per inhabitant while for *La Vera*, it was just 336 (Table 3). The figure for *Valle del Jerte* was also significant, with 838 euros per inhabitant. In any case, in all three LAGs the figure exceeded the average for the region (254 euros).

Table 3 Data on investments in the study area and Extremadura by population

	Aid requested/ Inhabitants	Public investment/ Inhabitants	Private investment/ Inhabitants	Accepted investment/ Inhabitants	Income/ Inhabitants 2020	Old Age Index 2022
ADICOVER (La Vera)	335.94	202.48	133.46	280.70	10,038.79	28.88
DIVA (Valle del Ambroz)	1111.51	558.57	552.94	915.96	9591.13	32.50
SOPRODEVAJE (Valle del Jerte)	837.71	534.03	303.68	649.81	8365.82	29.32
Extremadura	254.22	144.11	110.11	209.02	9408.73	28.88

Programming period 2014–2022

In the current programming period, all the LAGs in Extremadura had fairly similar levels of investment of around 7–8 million. However, if the population of each LAG is taken into account, although the most demographically and socioeconomically dynamic groups, located in the most developed areas of Extremadura (*Vegas del Gadiana*, *Tierra de Barros* and around the main cities) received large amounts of LEADER funding in absolute terms, they did not achieve such good results in terms of the investment per inhabitant, with values of less than 150 euros/inhabitant.

In the case of the three groups analysed, the private investment obtained far exceeded the average for Extremadura, with *Valle del Ambroz* and *Valle de Jerte* again standing out, with 552 and 303 euros/inhabitant, respectively. The investment accepted as of 31 December 2022 is another indicator of the efficient operation of these groups. In this case, *Valle del Ambroz* and *Valle del Jerte* again stand out, with 916 and 650 euros/inhabitant, respectively, figures that again exceed the average for Extremadura.

These promising results should be considered an achievement for the LAGs analysed, which, as mentioned above, have low incomes and a very aged population. *Valle del Jerte* and *Valle del Ambroz* have, for the moment, the highest total investments, the highest public investment and the highest investment already accepted for execution, especially with respect to their population. In the case of *La Vera*, there are municipalities with higher incomes and a younger population than in the other two LAG areas, but their dynamism is due to activities that are not related to or funded by LEADER, such as tobacco cultivation.

If we look at investment by type of project (Table 4), it is noteworthy that most of the investments approved to date are not related to the agricultural sector (e.g. projects for the creation or improvement of rural tourism accommodation or the modernization of other non-agricultural enterprises: educational, social, dissemination, leisure services, etc.). In *Valle del Ambroz*, this typology is strongly dominant, in that over 70% of investments have been destined to it. In *La Vera* and *Valle del Jerte*, there is a more equal balance between one typology and the other (territories where the agricultural sector is stronger with specific products with well-established brands such as cherries in *Valle del Jerte* or tobacco and paprika in *La Vera*).

The next group with the largest investments and number of projects is “Processing and marketing of agricultural products”, with 13%, which is followed by “Basic services for the rural economy and population”, with 10%. Conversely, there has been little investment in “Heritage Enhancement” or “Training” (categories with less than 2% each). At the end of the programming period, it will be necessary to carry out a more exhaustive study in order to verify whether or not there has been a diversification of activities (so far it seems that there has not) and which activities received the greatest final investment and generated most jobs and development.

3.1.2 Rejected Projects

As for rejected projects (Table 5), the average number for the Extremadura LAGs as a whole was 21 projects or 14.3% of the total number of projects requested up to

Table 4 Types of projects

	Support for social innovation, multilevel governance and social and economic dynamization		Support for operating expenses		Training and information for the economic and social agents that carry out their activities in the areas covered by the local development strategy of each LAG		Investments in the creation and development of non-agricultural businesses and activities in rural areas		Investments in processing and marketing of agricultural products	
	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*
ADICOVER (La Vera)	7	121,175	5	928,683			55	4,730,929	15	1,415,707
DIVA (Valle del Ambroz)	3	161,781	4	717,360	2	22,295	137	5,909,777	11	807,454
SOPRODEVAJE (Valle del Jerte)	19	466,380	5	1,119,736	34	248,329	53	3,868,780	13	1,199,134
Total	29	749,337	14	2,765,780	36	270,624	245	14,509,486	39	3,422,295
	Maintenance, recovery and restoration of rural heritage		Preparation and implementation of the local action group's cooperation activities		Basic services for the rural economy and population		Total			
	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*
ADICOVER (La Vera)	4	64,285			30	766,257	116			8,027,036
DIVA (Valle del Ambroz)			1	34,240	11	681,202	169			8,334,110
SOPRODEVAJE (Valle del Jerte)	15	684,950			21	1,120,674	160			8,707,983
Total	19	749,235	1	34,240	62	2,568,132	445			25,069,129

* Proj.: Number of projects

* Inv.: Aid requested (Euros)

31 December 2022. In the case of the study area, a larger number of projects were rejected in *Valle del Ambroz* and in *La Vera*, with 44 and 31, respectively, 26% of the total number of projects for the two LAGs. In *Valle del Jerte*, by contrast, only 11 projects were rejected (6%). It is interesting to note that, in the rejected projects, more than 90% of the private investment had been accepted at the time of rejection. This is probably due to the crisis produced by COVID-19, which in the most disadvantaged areas meant that the entrepreneurs who had applied for LEADER funding could not put up the remaining private funds or keep the business open for 5 years (a mandatory requirement). This caused the projects to be finally rejected.

If we analyse the rejected projects by type of project (Tables 6 and 7), the most numerous were those aimed at the expansion and modernization of companies, with 64% of the total. These projects did not get off the ground because, in most cases, the plans were disrupted by the pandemic, for example, there were production slowdowns due to shortages of raw materials, staff shortages due to medical leave, and temporary business closures due to lockdown. As a result, several promoters did not comply with the deadlines and their applications for LEADER funding were finally rejected.

In the case of projects related to rural tourism, fewer projects were rejected, in both the modernization of existing accommodation (12.5% of projects and 6% of investments) and the creation of new accommodation (8.4% and 21% of projects and investments, respectively). The same applied to the restaurant sector (3% of projects and 0.7% of investments). In general, rural tourism is a sector that has withstood the crisis better, in the sense that it is generally made up of smaller businesses with fewer expenses which were only forced to close during the worst months of the pandemic and were then favoured by the boom in domestic tourism during the year 2020 and part of 2021, due to the closures of international borders and the preference amongst tourists for holidays close to home (Ríos Rodríguez et al., 2022).

Due to the crisis produced by the pandemic, in the 3 LAGs studied, there were fewer applications for projects to create new companies than in previous periods, which meant that there were relatively few rejected projects in this category (12%

Table 5 Rejected projects

	Aid requested (Euros)	Private investment (Euros)	Accepted investment (Euros)	Number of projects
ADICOVER (La Vera)	2,690,129.91	2,690,129.91	2,370,95.072	31
DIVA (Valle del Ambroz)	783,113.14	783,113.14	777,069.55	44
SOPRODEVAJE (Valle del Jerte)	1,112,023.51	1,112,023.51	1,105,887.68	11
Local Action Groups Average	1,528,422.19	1,528,422.19	1,417,969.32	28.67
Average for Extremadura	764,211.09	764,211.09	708,984.66	21.25

Table 6 Rejected projects by type

	Expansion and modernization of company		Expansion and improvements in rural tourism accommodation		Creation of tourist resorts		Improvements in restaurants		Creation of companies	
	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*
ADICOVER (<i>La Vera</i>)	18	1,200,747	6	28,285	5	1,102,274	0	0	2	116,743
DIVA (<i>Valle del Ambroz</i>)	31	629,889	8	57,753	0	0	4	16,769	1	66,203
SOPRODEVAJE (<i>Valle del Jerte</i>)	7	650,913	0	0	1	254,464	0	0	3	206,647
Total	56	2,481,549	14	340,618	6	1,356,738	4	16,769	6	389,594
Local Action Groups Average	18.67	827,183	4.67	113,539	2	452,246	1.33	5590	2.00	129,865

* Proj.: Number of projects

* Inv.: Aid requested (Euros)

Table 7 Rejected project typologies (%)

	Expansion and modernization of company		Expansion and improvements in rural tourism accommodation		Creation of tourist resorts		Improvements in restaurants		Creation of companies	
	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*
ADICOVER (La Vera)	58.06	44.43	19.35	10.47	16.13	40.79	0.00	0.00	6.45	4.32
DIVA (Valle del Ambroz)	70.45	81.74	18.18	7.49	0.00	0.00	9.09	2.18	2.27	8.59
SOPRODEVAJE (Valle del Jerte)	63.64	58.53	0.00	0.00	9.09	22.88	0.00	0.00	27.27	18.58
Total	64.05	61.57	12.51	5.99	8.41	21.22	3.03	0.73	12.00	10.50
Local Action Groups Average	58.06	44.43	19.35	10.47	16.13	40.79	0.00	0.00	6.45	4.32

* Proj.: Number of projects

* Inv.: Aid requested (% of total)

of all rejected projects and 10.5% of investments). In addition, it is important to remember that these are highly ruralized areas with little business fabric and, in the successive stages of LEADER, it has been increasingly difficult to find new promoters to invest in other sectors that would help diversify the local economy away from the agro-industrial sector, especially with a maximum grant of 200,000 euros per project.

If we analyse LEADER at the regional level in Extremadura, only nine of the 24 LAGs have had projects rejected, including the three studied here in this paper. These 9 LAGs are located in the most rural mountain areas of Extremadura, such as *Las Villuercas* and *Cáparra*, although projects have also been rejected in agricultural areas in the south of the province of Badajoz, such as *Campiña Sur*. In these LAGs, the aforementioned patterns are repeated, in that the largest number of rejected projects were for the modernization and expansion of companies. Other types can also be found, such as the acquisition of agricultural machinery or the expansion of farms (these projects were requested in LAGs such as *Campiña Sur* or in municipalities of the peneplain of the province of Cáceres, where the main business activity is rain-fed agriculture).

3.2 *Projects that Are Currently Ongoing*

We will now go on to look at the LEADER Initiative from the perspective of the projects that have been requested over the last two years and are currently in the early stages of implementation (Table 8). Thus, in the last year and a half, almost the same number of projects have been applied for and provisionally approved as in the previous four years. In Extremadura, 2156 projects have received provisional approval in the last year and a half, as compared to 2730 project applications (2560 provisionally approved and 170 rejected) in the previous four years. This gives room for optimism and shows that despite the slowdown and delays in the application process due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this situation is being reversed and local actors and promoters are once again getting involved and investing in LEADER programmes.

Different trends appear in the study area. In *La Vera*, the LAG with the smallest number of project applications, in this final stage there has been an increase of 129% in the number of projects that must be carried out in the two years. At the opposite end of the scale is *Valle del Ambroz*, which has only applied for 9.3% of its projects

Table 8 Number of projects according to their status

	Extremadura	LAGs total	ADICOVER (La Vera)	DIVA (Valle del Ambroz)	SOPRODEVAJE (Valle del Jerte)
Approved	2560	445	116	169	160
Rejected	170	86	31	44	11
Ongoing	2156	277	190	20	67

in this final stage, and is closing the management of those already underway. In the case of *Valle del Jerte*, there is not such a great difference between the first years of the programming period and the last most recent ones, although it has also applied for a large number of projects in the most recent stage (39%).

If instead of the number of projects, we analyse the amounts requested (Table 9), there are major differences among the three LAGs. In *La Vera*, in the last two years, they have applied for projects with a total budget that was almost double the amount executed in the previous years, while in *Valle del Jerte*, it was just 15% more, and in *Valle del Ambroz* only 6% more.

Most of the project applications were for business activities unrelated to the agricultural sector (Table 10). In the three LAGs, more than 70% of the funds applied for were for rural tourism and the modernization and/or expansion of existing service companies. This trend was particularly clear in *La Vera*, where over 87% of the requested budget was devoted to these sectors.

In view of the above, it can be concluded that in some LAGs the approval of projects was delayed by the pandemic, as happened in *La Vera*. In addition, it also seems that LEADER expenditure has been executed hastily over a short period of time. These are initial estimates and conclusions which, when the programming period is over, will have to be analysed again in greater detail.

In this initial analysis of possible shared characteristics of the rejected projects, the number of rejected projects seems to be related to the dynamism and the number of projects by sectors of activity of each LAG, so that *Valle del Ambroz*, which had made a larger number of project applications, also had a larger number rejected, especially those relating to expanding and improving activities in the agricultural sector. Promoters in territories such as *La Vera*, and to a lesser extent *Valle del Jerte* were more conservative in their approach prior to the pandemic, while in the last two years they have been making a large number of applications, both in the tourism sector and in projects to expand and improve existing agricultural businesses (products such as paprika and tobacco in *La Vera* or cherries in *Valle del Jerte*).

Table 9 Data for ongoing projects

	Aid requested (Euros)	Aid requested and rejected	Accepted investment (Euros)	Number of projects
ADICOVER (La Vera)	19,304,322.90	10,717,166	1,928,894.07	190
DIVA (Valle del Ambroz)	591,348.21	9,117,223	157,387.42	20
SOPRODEVAJE (Valle del Jerte)	1,488,774.83	9,820,007	82,680.56	67
Extremadura	192,697,448.94	190,940,548	42,064,788.37	2156

Table 10 Types of ongoing projects

	Support for social innovation, multilevel governance and social and economic dynamization		Support for operating expenses		Training and information for the economic and social agents that carry out their activities in the areas covered by the local development strategy of each LAG		Investments in the creation and development of non-agricultural businesses and activities in rural areas		Investments in processing and marketing of agricultural products	
	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*
ADICOVER (La Vera)			1	8,440	157	16,775,164	22	2,304,446	1	21,383
DIVA (Valle del Ambroz)	1	6,861			15	517,170	1	12,500		
SOPRODEVAJE (Valle del Jerte)	2	6,050	33	55,591	24	1,094,068	4	206,413	1	55,142
Total	3	12,911	34	64,031	196	18,386,402	27	2,523,360	2	76,525
	Maintenance, recovery and restoration of rural heritage		Preparation and implementation of the local action group's cooperation activities		Basic services for the rural economy and population		Total			
	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*	Proj.*	Inv.*
ADICOVER (La Vera)	2	30,792	2	61,715	5	102,383	190	19,304,323		
DIVA (Valle del Ambroz)	2	36,818	1	18,000			20	591,348		
SOPRODEVAJE (Valle del Jerte)	1	20,792			2	50,718	67	1,488,775		
Total	5	88,401	3	79,715	7	153,101	277	21,384,446		

3.3 Results of the Interviews

Over the period 2014–2021, most of the interviewees (technicians and managers of the LAGs of *Valle del Ambroz*, *La Vera* and *Valle del Jerte*) stated that local residents and businesspeople in their municipalities had turned to them for advice, help or opinions on the grants available under the LEADER Approach.

As regards the impact of LEADER, 80% of the interviewees considered that LEADER had promoted, in a positive, appropriate way the endogenous and sustainable development of their *comarcas*, as well as the economic diversification. They added that most of this diversification had been in SMEs, and the Services, Tourism and Craft sectors, the sectors to which most funds have traditionally been directed, and, to a lesser extent, in the Enhancement of Agricultural Production, Heritage and Environment, Training and Cooperation. However, although they claimed that they were diversifying, at the same time, they also recognized that they had tended to invest in the same sectors. This was perhaps because in view of the available endogenous resources of their territories, these activities were the most likely to generate progress and increase income. All those interviewed stated that LEADER had helped maintain the population of their *comarcas*, increase incomes, and improve the social well-being of local people, especially through the creation of tertiary services (restaurants, accommodation, etc.), and cultural and sports infrastructures. It had also helped promote education and sports.

As regards the difficulties they had had to deal with over recent years, they highlighted various bureaucratic and administrative obstacles, which they claimed had caused the successive programmes, and specifically the most recent (2014–2022), to be carried out with various shortcomings and delays, problems that had been exacerbated by the effects of COVID-19. However, they also praised the support provided by LEADER for companies affected by the pandemic, with a high percentage of aid for investments of over 10,000 euros. They said that this line of support was very effective and also covered small projects for which it was previously practically impossible to receive any kind of grant. They therefore argued that small projects should have less strict, much simpler administrative and management procedures, and should not have to overcome the same administrative hurdles as a large investment project, especially given that, in their opinion, small projects are the ones that most benefit the basic economy of their municipalities, so contributing to the fight against depopulation.

When asked to analyse the successes and achievements of LEADER, all the interviewees stated that throughout the various programming periods, the number of projects had remained more or less stable. They also stressed that they had not found it difficult to comply with the initially planned budgets, and that in fact they had always managed to increase spending at the end of the period, which they considered to be a real achievement. Therefore, after analysing and reflecting on the history and experiences of their LAGs since LEADER was first launched and in particular in the 2014–2022 period, they all considered that in the municipalities in their area, there had been more successes than failures, and that the successes had been directly

linked with the goals set out in their strategies. For example, promoting tourism and environmental conservation, or creating business activity in the service sector and agri-food industry.

As regards the beneficiaries, in all cases, the technicians emphasized that those who are most involved, who risk the most and decide to invest are self-employed people, small and medium-sized companies and cooperatives.

In the years in which these LAGs have been operating, the interviewees stated that there have been few failed projects, for example, projects that closed or businesses that have ceased trading (below 5%). Most of the failed projects were implemented by adult men (as would be expected given that they are also the main beneficiaries of the LEADER programme).

Finally, when asked to highlight projects that they considered a real success and an example of the LEADER philosophy, they highlighted the *Otoño Mágico*, which is based in *Valle del Ambroz*, although its influence extends to practically all of the three LAG areas. In *La Vera* (ADICOVER LAG), they highlighted the *Sabor Verato* canned vegetables project.

4 Conclusions

In this chapter, we studied the current programming period of the LEADER Approach (2014–2020), a neo-endogenous rural development strategy that has been operating in our study area (three LAGs in the north of the Spanish region of Extremadura) since 1991. LEADER is therefore an initiative with a long history and a great deal of experience, which has undergone numerous changes along the way. Most recently, these include the changes and adaptations in execution schedules due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused the programming period to be extended and renamed 2014–2022.

The three rural territories studied here, i.e. the areas covered by the LAGs of *Valle del Ambroz*, *Valle del Jerte* and *La Vera*, are located in mountainous areas in the north of the province of Cáceres and have low populations, high levels of ageing and a poorly developed business fabric. However, due to initiatives such as LEADER, the deep rural areas of Extremadura have been experiencing lower demographic losses in recent decades than other regions of Extremadura. An interesting range of business activities centred around rural tourism and the exploitation of niche agricultural resources such as cherries, paprika and tobacco are all grounds for optimism going forward.

From a methodological perspective, the study has been carried out using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. We analysed a range of data for the LEADER projects for this period, for which purposes the projects were classified into three types: (i) approved projects (those that have received definitive approval and have over 80% executed); (ii) rejected projects and (iii) ongoing projects (projects provisionally approved during the last year and a half, for which the first private investments are currently being processed and executed). The qualitative part of our study was based

on interviews with the technicians employed by the LAGs who were asked about different aspects of LEADER operations over the last programming period, taking into account, above all, the difficulties they have had to face during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The main results are that, in terms of the number of investments managed so far, the three LAGs have received grants of more than 8 million euros each. In this case, the largest amount was obtained by *Valle del Jerte*, although all three received more than the average for Extremadura as a whole. As regards the number of projects, *Valle del Jerte* and *Valle de Ambroz* have a similar number (over 160 each), while *La Vera* has substantially fewer, although it also exceeds the average for the region. The first two LAGs managed to mobilize larger amounts of capital and projects, and as a result they also had more rejected projects, especially in activities linked to the agricultural sector and to the improvement and modernization of companies. This is particularly remarkable if we take into account that these two LAGs are sparsely populated (*Valle del Ambroz* and *Valle del Jerte* have populations of 7500 and 10,400 respectively, while *La Vera* has more than double with 24,000). This trend has been changing in the last two years of the programming period, in which *La Vera* has been applying for and implementing more projects, a sign of its increased dynamism in socioeconomic and demographic terms.

In general, we can conclude that the number of projects and the funds secured in each area are highly dependent on the territorial characteristics (and within them the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics) of each LAG. The role of the projects in the dynamization of the business fabric in their areas and their capacity to adapt to the economic situation are also of paramount importance. According to the LAG technicians interviewed, they have all adapted well to the problems that arose, even if in some cases the data on projects or investments might suggest otherwise.

In future, once the 2014–2022 programming period has come to an official end, it would be interesting to take another look at the management of LEADER in the study area to assess whether there is still a sense of haste in some groups and greater stability and balance in others. With the final LEADER 2014–2022 data, it will be possible to analyse in more detail the extent to which business activity in each area has been diversified and how successful it has been at creating enduring employment over time, the two main objectives of European rural development policy.

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The Valorization of Agri-Food and Forestry Products as an Example of Innovation and Multifunctionality in the LEADER Approach in Castilla y León



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Abstract In this chapter, we investigate the contribution made by LEADER grants to the development of successful projects aimed at the valorization of agri-food and forestry products. We focus in particular on the typological analysis of these LEADER funded projects and their contribution to the development of territorialized, multifunctional agrarian systems in Castilla y León in Spain. The regional context of analysis—the 44 local action groups that operate in Castilla y León—provides a framework for this case study of three success stories that we believe are representative of the efficacy of these investments in both social and territorial terms. Our aim is to emphasize the continued importance of the farming and forestry sectors in rural areas and the economic potential for the diversification of associated activities which contribute to rural development. To this end, we investigate the investments and actions organized and channelled through the local action groups (LAG) aimed at improving rural areas within the framework of the new discourse on sustainability, which the climate, health and geostrategic crises have prioritized in relation to the supply of primary sector products.

Keywords LEADER · Castilla y León · Multi-functionality · Territory · Innovation

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1 Introduction

After more than three decades of implementation, the LEADER approach, either as a European community initiative or as a strategy within the framework of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is a fundamental point of reference for understanding the development of rural areas in Europe since the 1990s. Its new philosophy ushered in a fundamental process of change in the prevailing conception of rural spaces from an exclusively agrarian model of rural development to another alternative approach based on a wide range of activities and the diversification of income sources.

The origins of European rural development policy can be found in the LEADER community initiative implemented between 1991 and 1993 with a relatively small budget, which tried to support the transformation of the rural world by encouraging new uses of local resources that were different from those traditionally applied (Gordo Gómez, 2011). This first LEADER Community initiative set a precedent for a new way of understanding rural development with a territorial approach led by local agents designed and applied from the bottom up. This facilitated the subsequent implementation of the LEADER II community initiative (1994–1999) and the LEADER + initiative (2000–2006) (Esparcia Pérez et al., 2015), which were later followed by the application of the LEADER approach as Axis 4 of the Regional Development Programmes and of the Community-Led Local Development Strategy 2014–2020, which is still being applied today. The integration of LEADER into the regional development programmes implemented by each member state has facilitated its expansion to almost all rural areas, although it has reduced its operational capacity to some extent. This is because LEADER has become one more in a range of policy instruments, and by no means the most important in terms of resources, within a much wider framework that prioritizes actions aimed at the promotion and improvement of farming, environmental sustainability and the enhancement of the quality of life. Although one of its objectives is to support the achievement of Axes 1 and 3 of the RDPs—increasing the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector, quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy—, there are various obstacles that complicate the analysis of its results and performance.

Since it first appeared LEADER has gone through several different stages. From being a Community Initiative until 2006 (with different formats and periods: LEADER I, II and +), to being a methodological approach from 2007 to 2013 and a Local Development Initiative in the most recent period (2014–2020). Legal changes have affected the way the programme is managed and the procedure for justifying expenditure. These changes have not always been positive in that they have resulted in increased interference and supervision from regional authorities (Cejudo García et al., 2021). However, LEADER has maintained its original bottom-up approach and its essential philosophy in which Rural Development revolves around the promotion of economic diversification and making the most of local resources, both tangible and intangible.

Over the period 1996–2006, LEADER was complemented with the PRODER Rural Development programmes, which were also financed with European funds

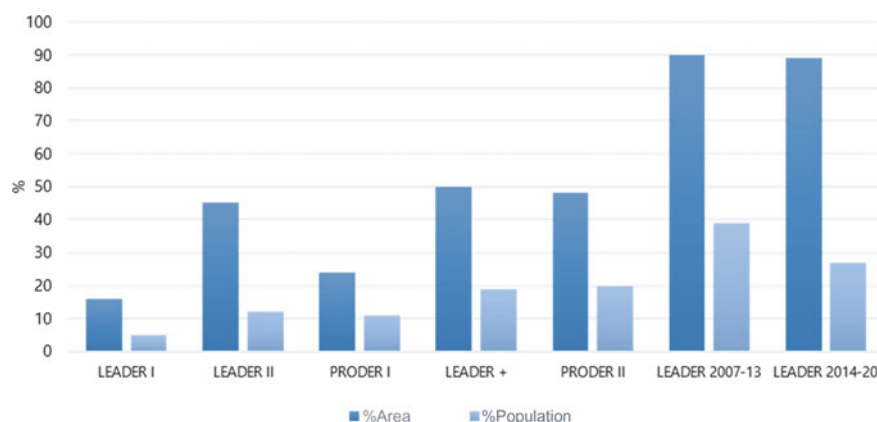


Fig. 1 Rural development programmes. Spain 1991–2020. Area and population covered. *Source* Alario Trigueros (2021b): The LEADER strategy and its contribution to the sustainability of rural areas, UIMP Galicia, Course—Demographic challenges and public policies for depopulated Spain

albeit through Support for the Regions Objective 1. Far from altering LEADER's essential philosophy, PRODER reinforced it and extended it to cover almost all rural areas of Spain.

After a difficult start in which local actors encountered a series of problems when trying to access the initial LEADER Community initiative funds, its good results, the improvements in its management and the decisive support it received from the European, National and Regional Administrations enabled the consolidation of new versions of the initiative until the 2007–2013 programming period with the progressive expansion of the area and the population it covered. As a result, in the current LEADER programming period (2014–2020), there are 251 programmes in the different rural sub-regions, which cover 89% of the total area of Spain and 27% of its population (Fig. 1).

2 LEADER and Territorial Development Strategies: The Role of the Valorization of Local Products

The LEADER approach has been consolidated over the last thirty years. It involves allowing the local communities in each rural area to take the initiative in planning. Organized in local action groups (public–private associations with assembly-like procedures), they draw up and execute a development strategy for their area that makes the most of local resources.

Although considerable emphasis has been placed on the value of the bottom-up participative method, which is a key characteristic of LEADER, in each programming

period certain extra requirements have been added: innovation and the dissemination of good practices, economic diversification, social sustainability and the fight against depopulation, heritage restoration, social and territorial cohesion, reinforcement of territorial identity, promotion of gender equality, etc. However, its fundamental philosophy remains intact, i.e. promoting social and economic development, improving the quality of life of the population, supporting business diversification and making the most of local resources, be they the local actors themselves, the quality of specific products, local know-how or the values intrinsic to the territory.

Promoting economic diversification within a rural context dominated by agriculture has led to a search for alternative activities to those considered traditional. Efforts have been directed towards the development of other sectors such as industry and services and above all rural tourism, which became the star attraction of LEADER I and II, together with the development of services for the population, the recovery of craft activities, the development of SMEs and other actions to promote cultural activities and heritage restoration.

In fact, under LEADER rules, it is expressly forbidden to use LEADER funds to support traditional farming activities. This, together with a pre-eminently non-agrarian rural development model, caused the funds to be channelled in various different directions. Nonetheless, ever since it first started, LEADER has offered continuous support, as a priority line of action, to the valorization of local products by promoting new non-traditional, agricultural, livestock and forestry produce, and their transformation, distribution and/or commercialization. In this way, the added value created by these activities remains within the rural area generating wealth, sustaining the business fabric and creating jobs. Although there have been slight changes in the names of the different LEADER programmes, they have all had a specific line of finance offering systematic support for projects of this kind (Table 1).

Even though LEADER supports an alternative approach to rural development that departs from the traditional model, we should not forget that farming remains a fundamental part of rural life, not only from a purely economic perspective, but also in its role as a generator of social structure and in the organization of space and landscape. As farming is an activity that cannot be relocated, it is an excellent option for the generation of wealth, augmenting its added value by transforming and commercializing the product in situ.

It is clear that alternative farming models based on valorizing non-conventional, territorialized and multifunctional products have received very little support within the framework of a productivist CAP, which is strongly based on Pillar 1, financed by the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF). These other more innovative paths, including those based on quality, and sustainable and healthy production objectives, may be supported within the framework of Pillar 2 of the CAP, financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). This second Pillar also finances LEADER and is more flexible in that it allows the different administrations to draft their own strategies within the framework of rural development programmes spanning several years. Convergence is not only necessary but also possible.

Table 1 Valorization of locally-based farm products in the LEADER/PRODER lines of finance 1991–2020

LEADER I 1991–1993	Measure 5. Valorization and commercialization of local farm products		
LEADER II 1994–1999	Measure B5. Valorization and commercialization of farm and forestry products	PRODER I 1994–99	Measure 7. Revalorization of farm and forestry production potential
LEADER+ 2000–2006	Axis 1. Measure 105. Valorization of local and farm products	PRODER II and AGADER 2000–2006	Measure 5. Revalorization of farm and forestry production potential (PRODER II) Measure 4. Valorization of farm products (AGADER)
LEADER 2007–2013 (in RDP)	Application of local development strategies through the LEADER approach with a view to achieving the objectives of Axis 1. Increase the competitiveness of the farm and forestry sector Measure 411: Increase the added value of farm and forestry products Measure 413: Quality of life and diversification of the economy		
LEADER COMMUNITY- LED LOCAL DEVELOPMENT 2014–20 (in RDP)	Measure 19.2.3: Help for the creation, modernization and/or transfer of Small and Medium-Sized Companies (SMEs) related with the increase in the added value of farm, agri-food and forestry products and the promotion of farm, agri-food and forestry products		

Source Red Rural Nacional (2011): LEADER in Spain (1991–2011) and RDP Spain 2007–13 and 2014–2020. Drawn up by: M. Alario

Although all the LEADER programmes are officially evaluated, their analysis in academic research, using mostly quantitative methods, has highlighted both the successes and the failures of these projects, putting the spotlight on newer non-agricultural sectors such as rural tourism. In this chapter, we apply more qualitative criteria in an analysis of successful projects involving the valorization of farm and forestry products. As an additional, complementary objective, we also propose to identify the main factors that could constitute key aspects of transferable experiences,

as exemplified with the analysis of three specific case studies in the Castilla y León region of Spain.

3 Study Area and Method of Analysis

Castilla y León is not only the largest Spanish region in terms of its surface area (94,226 km²) and the most rural and agricultural, it is also the region with the greatest demographic weaknesses, which are seriously damaging the viability of many rural communities. In macroeconomic terms, the agri-food sector is a strategic pillar of the economy of this region. In 2021, it provided 14.2% of the total Gross Value Added (7227 million euros) and 15.2% of jobs (147,921 people), putting it in fifth place in terms of GVA in Spain (Maudos et al., 2022). There is a fairly even balance between the various different links in the supply chain in this sector, with the transformation industry providing 37.7%, commercialization and distribution 24.8% and primary production 37.5% of GVA (idem). In spite of all this, after spending more than three decades adapting to the different approaches of the CAP, the primary sector has become highly dependent on subsidies. In the financial year 2022, the transfers from the EAGF and EAFRD totalled 1,198.6 million euros, and the direct subsidy payments represented on average 30% of farmers' incomes. In spite of these huge injections of funds, the CAP with its strongly sector-based and economic bias has been unable to stem the rural exodus. Between 1991 and 2022, the different types of rural areas lost a total of 282,707 inhabitants, falling from 49.7% of the regional population to 41.4% (Table 2). In the same way, the percentage of the working population employed in this sector fell from 25.2% in 1986 to 6.6% of the total in 2021. In addition, some agricultural workers do not even live in rural areas and instead prefer to commute to the countryside from their homes in towns and cities (Baraja-Rodríguez et al., 2021).

Table 2 Population of Castilla y León (1991 to 2022) by types of settlement

Type of settlement	1991	2000	2007	2015	2022
Urban	1,183,204	1,177,469	1,205,747	1,180,449	1,142,356
Periurban	96,325	131,303	193,048	235,798	246,594
Deep rural	552,813	480,283	429,056	374,396	334,547
Stagnant rural	260,038	238,505	228,971	213,216	199,665
Progressive and dynamic rural	453,546	451,558	471,595	468,193	449,478
Total urban population	1,279,529	1,308,772	1,398,795	1,416,247	1,388,950
Total rural population	1,266,397	1,170,346	1,129,622	1,055,805	983,690
Total population	2,545,926	2,479,118	2,528,417	2,472,052	2,372,640

Source Spanish National Statistics Institute, Census of Population 1991 and Continuous Register Statistics 2000 to 2022. F. Molinero

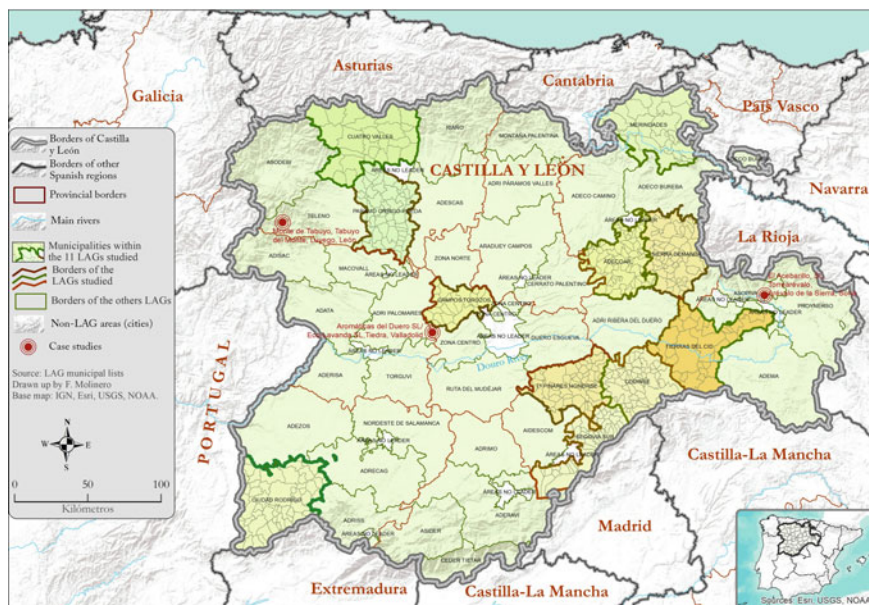


Fig. 2 Local action groups. Castilla y León 2014–2020. *Source* Municipal Lists of LAGs. Drawn up by F. Molinero. Base map: IGN, USGS, NOAA

This situation has accentuated the depopulation problem and the different strategies proposed to address it have systematically emphasized the role that the LAGs could play in the solution of the serious demographic crisis in rural areas, in that they have enormous accumulated experience in local territorial management. In the specific case of Castilla y León, there are 44 local action groups that apply the LEADER philosophy, covering 97% of the territory and affecting 41% of the regional population, according to an *ex ante* evaluation of the RDP 2014–2020 (2015) (Fig. 2).

In the last Regional Development Programme to be completed and evaluated (2007–2013), the most important priority in Castilla y León, with 22% of total scheduled spending, was Measure 123 (Axis 1) (improving the competitiveness of the regional agri-food sector), which included projects aimed at the promotion and valorization of local products. In the particular case being studied here, these objectives were also furthered by Axis 4, which with an additional 10.2% of total scheduled spending had an important multiplier effect. Although LEADER played only a minor role in these actions, the report evaluating its impact recognized the innovative value of projects aimed at the valorization of farm products for the diversification of production, within the framework of LEADER 2007–2013 (Ex-post Evaluation Report CyL, p. 122 and 25) (Fundación General de la Universidad de Valladolid, 2016, pp. 25 and 122). They were generally considered to have had very positive effects in that “half the projects within the actions aimed at boosting employment and diversification have had a direct or indirect influence on the increase in the

competitiveness of the farming and forestry sector (Axis 1)”, by promoting technological improvements, enhancing the adaptation of local products to the demands of the market and their transformation with greater added value, so increasing overall levels of economic activity (Ibidem, 259 and 230). The number of projects actually linked to Measure 411 (increase in the value added of farm and forestry products) is very small (87), making up less than 3% of total LEADER spending (Ibidem, p. 202). However, it is important to bear in mind that in view of the limited margin for execution that the legislation offers the LAGs, not all projects for the valorization of local products are expressly financed as such (Measure 411), as in many cases they are assigned to funds for the support and development of SMEs (Measure 413), especially in the case of agri-food industries.

The local development strategy based on the LEADER method was maintained (Measure 19.2) in the RDP 2014–2020, which was extended and continues to be implemented today. Its objectives include subsidizing “the creation, expansion, modernization or transfer of small and medium sized companies (SMEs) related with the increase in value added and the fomenting of farm, agri-food and forestry products (19.2.3)” (Resolution of 13 June 2016, BOCyL N° 11) (Consejería de Agricultura y Ganadería. Junta de Castilla y León, 2016). Although it continues to be a minority line of finance with a budget of less than 3% of the total, it is very important in rural areas and has helped many successful and innovative projects get off the ground.

In the period up to 2020, by which time 46% of the programme had been executed, in Spain as a whole, 13% of the projects were linked to agri-food and forestry products. In Castilla y León, this figure was much higher at 20%, after the significant reduction in support for rural tourism as LEADER’S priority option for economic diversification (Table 3). This is why our aim here is to study the characteristics of successful projects of this kind.

Table 3 Projects approved within the different lines of finance. LEADER 2014–2020. Spain

Line of finance	Spain	Castilla y León
Tourism and the promotion of tourist activities	641	49
Basic services for the general public	264	6
Agri-food and forestry products	650	115
Non-farming SMEs and Industry	1584	179
Training	22	0
Cultural Heritage	33	1
Economic Dynamization	32	0
Natural Heritage	3	0
Results on the basis of the replies from 106 LAGs, with a degree of execution of 45.8%		

Source Red Española de Desarrollo Rural (2020): “Compilation of statistics of interest about Local Action Groups for each Autonomous Community. 2020”. FEADER, MAPA, RRN

In methodological terms, this study has been carried out on the basis of previous research conducted in 2021 into the situation of rural companies in Castilla y León. This was carried out within the framework of the “+ Empresas + Empleo + Rural” (More Companies, More Employment, More Rural) regional cooperation project and sought to identify opportunities in rural areas for the reactivation and maintenance of their economy in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The specific objectives included investigating the impact on these territories of the local development programmes carried out by the Local Action Groups, evaluating their influence on the current business structure and finding out what the most actively involved stakeholders think of them.

This research did not cover the whole region. Given the territorial diversity and huge size of Castilla y León, the study area was reduced to 11 of the 44 territories in which these groups operate (Fig. 3). These 11 areas have very different environmental, economic and social profiles, but at the same time are representative of the current situation in the region. They include mountain areas (Cordillera Cantábrica, Cordillera Central and Cordillera Ibérica), areas along the border with Portugal, and areas in the plains and valleys in the centre of Castilla y León.

Once we had established which areas to include in the sample group, we then carried out the study according to a mixed qualitative and quantitative methodology. On the one hand, we analysed all the sources of demographic and economic data available at different scales, and in particular at municipal level. These sources included databases with business information and above all the data provided by the Social Security office regarding the number of companies and people in work by municipality at different times—2007, 2019 and 2020—. These dates serve as milestones between the different stages i) prior to the financial crisis, ii) in the recovery pre-COVID and iii) the current situation post-COVID. They also provided exhaustive information about the projects financed by the LAGs, which enabled us to analyse the changes in the role of LEADER grants in the development and maintenance of local business activities.

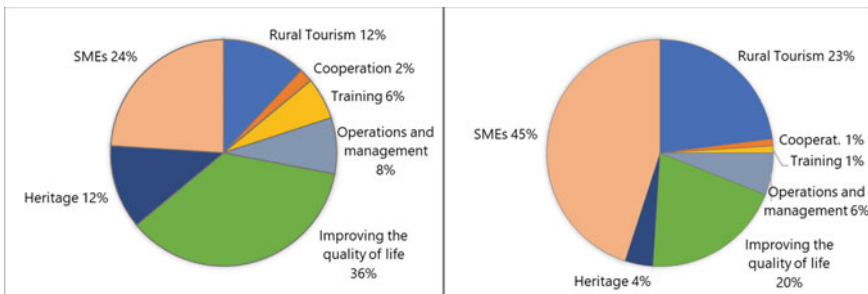


Fig. 3 Projects (left) and Investments (right). LEADER/PRODER Rural Development Programmes. Castilla y León. Study Area 1991–2020. *Source* Alario Triguero (2021a): Study of the current situation of rural businesses aimed at identifying the opportunities offered by rural areas for the reactivation and maintenance of their economy after the situation generated by COVID-19, p. 69

However, even though the analysis is quite detailed and the associated maps allow us to reach precise conclusions that enable us to trace an outline of the main economic and demographic structures, the quantitative dimension of our analysis proved insufficient to understand the reasons why people decided to start businesses or to take certain decisions about existing business projects. Nor was it sufficient to enable us to assess the individual and collective opinions of local agents regarding LEADER. For this reason, we turned to consistent qualitative procedures, firstly, involving the design of a questionnaire sent to the economic agents in these territories which was answered by 843 businesspeople, or about 10% of all the companies registered with the Spanish Social Security Department. In order to complete this information, in-depth interviews were carried out with 69 business owners in the 11 territories. Having drawn up some partial conclusions, the third stage involved holding meetings for debate and discussion with local agents. These meetings had between 8 and 10 participants, in particular mayors, businesspeople, development agents and members of economic, cultural, and environmental organizations. The intention was to review the results obtained in the previous stages, discuss possible solutions for the problems detected and ascertain the opinions of local people and stakeholders about their territories.

4 Results and Case Studies

The local action groups that operate in the 11 selected territories have a great deal of experience in the management of LEADER projects, as most of them have been working in their particular local areas for over two decades. This continuous work over time has enabled them to assess the impact of their activities on the local economy and society.

4.1 General Results

The first result obtained is that progress has been made in the achievement of the general objectives of rural development: promoting the diversification of the economy and taking advantage of local resources in order to create employment and dynamize rural areas in economic terms, restoring and valorizing local heritage at the same time as improving the quality of life of the population by supporting processes of cultural activation, repairing local infrastructures and facilities and promoting the image of the sub-region. In fact, the results of the survey showed that most of the promoters had very positive opinions about the LEADER grants and about the Local Action Groups themselves. Similarly in spite of its limited resources, they recognized the important role played by LEADER in the promotion and maintenance of the business fabric, in the development of new activities, and in the social and even territorial cohesion of their respective areas. This is due to the particular spatial

application of LEADER. On the one hand, non-business projects tend to be more dispersed. This is especially true of those related with improvements in the quality of life and in particular the restoration and conservation of historic, artistic and cultural heritage. In addition, after a quarter of a century of LEADER actions, the effects of LEADER-sponsored business projects can be noted in the vast majority of the municipalities and they are quite evenly distributed with the balance perhaps being tipped towards the small municipalities. However, this finding does not contradict the general trend whereby business-related projects tend to be concentrated in the larger municipalities, in that entrepreneurship also tends to be concentrated in areas with a higher, younger population, which are generally better communicated and where companies normally choose to set up, especially service sector businesses that seek to cover the needs of the entire sub-regional market. One exception is rural tourism projects, which are much more widely scattered throughout the whole territory.

Secondly and analysing the programme at project level, we found that in all the areas studied over the period 1991–2020, the LAGs have managed over 5000 projects with 163 million euros of public funds, which have generated a total investment of around 400 million euros, so producing a multiplier effect of 1.45. As corresponds with the objectives of the LAG and the LEADER intervention strategy, the projects oriented towards economic diversification predominate, and in particular those in support of the creation and consolidation of small and medium-sized businesses (24%). These include businesses related with the valorization of local products such as agri-food and forestry products and those providing services and others aimed at rural tourism activities and infrastructures (12%) (Fig. 3 left).

The distribution of the investment confirms the role played by business projects aimed at economic diversification. The projects that strengthen the productive fabric of the area are also of great importance. Almost half the total investment went to SMEs (45%) and to rural tourism (23%), business activities that are fundamental today in all the rural areas analysed (Fig. 3 right).

The surveys revealed the economic impact of LEADER actions in that around 15% of the current business fabric has direct links with LEADER/PRODER grants, meaning that at some time in their history (setting up, expansion, modernization) they have benefitted from LEADER funding. LEADER has played a particularly important role in the industrial sector, in which the agri-food industry stands out with over 28% of companies having received LEADER support (Fig. 4).

However, the effects of LEADER/PRODER funding are not only manifested in terms of their economic contribution. It is even more important that they have helped establish a diversified, solvent business fabric with a capacity for innovation, so encouraging entrepreneurship amongst women and young people and improving their access to the labour market. In fact, the companies who declared that they had received LEADER/PRODER funding have more female employees than the average for the study area as a whole. This may be due to the fact that for a project to receive funding it must create or maintain jobs and also to the relative importance of more feminized activities such as services. In the same way, in the indicator of investments in innovation in the last two years (Fig. 5), a greater tendency towards innovation can

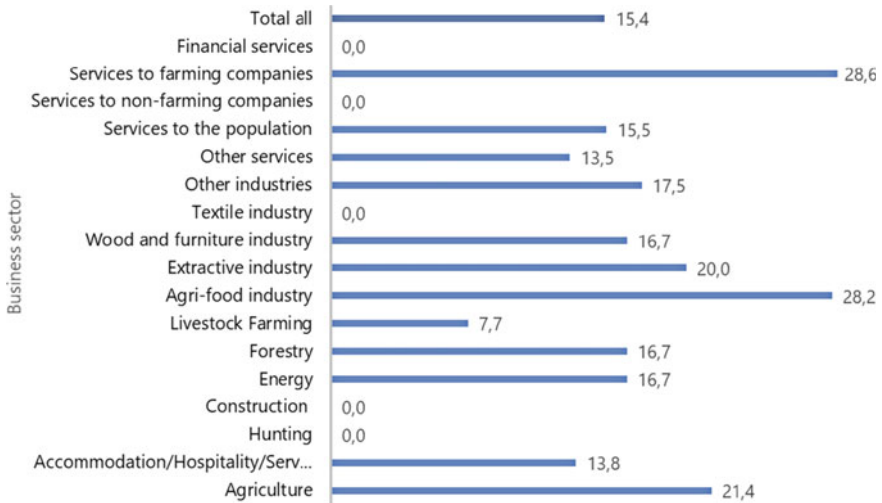


Fig. 4 Companies that received LEADER funding as a percentage of the total in each sector. Castilla y León. Study area 2021. *Source* Alario Trigueros (2021a): Study of the current situation of rural businesses aimed at identifying the opportunities offered by rural areas for the reactivation and maintenance of their economy after the situation generated by COVID-19, p. 70

be observed in the projects that have received LEADER support, with a difference of over 10 percentage points compared to the average for all companies.

In spite of this optimism, it is important to emphasize that although most of the policies linked to rural development are based on stimulating the labour market so as to help maintain the population, this has not been sufficient to stem the problems of demographic decline.

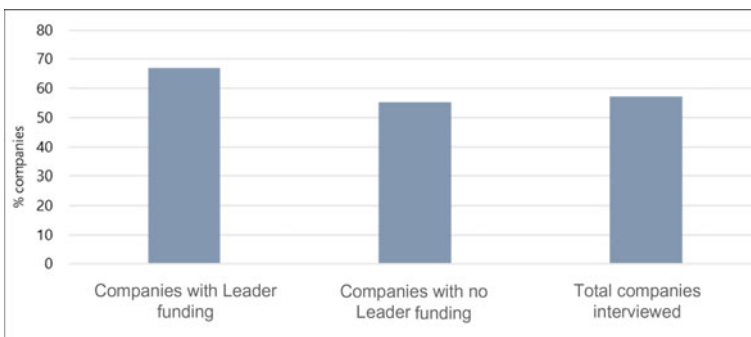


Fig. 5 Investments in innovative projects in the last two years. Castilla y León. Study area 2021. *Source* Alario Trigueros (2021a): Study of the current situation of rural businesses aimed at identifying the opportunities offered by rural areas for the reactivation and maintenance of their economy after the situation generated by COVID-19, p. 73

Another of the most significant results of this process was that the rural development policy carried out within the LEADER framework has cut all ties with farming in a bid to promote multi-functionality as a means of guaranteeing economic development and the quality of life in rural areas. It is almost as if farming, in spite of its importance, belonged to some separate reality. Although, as explained above, there are strategic and legal reasons for this separation, it is also important to highlight the potential dangers of rural development (as a territorial policy) and agricultural development (as a sector-based policy) following different paths. This artificial separation between the rural and the agrarian runs the risk of creating “territories without farmers”, so accentuating de-agriculturalization processes and restricting the potential for creating rural employment associated with agriculture (Silva Pérez, 2010).

Instead, what we need are “tractor projects” that can drag rural areas towards rural development. Paradoxically, given this apparent separation between LEADER and farming, the valorization of agri-food and forestry products would appear to a promising source of successful “tractor projects” that can be replicated in other areas. In fact, our analysis on the ground revealed that the most successful case stories amongst the projects funded within this line of finance were also the most solidly anchored in the territory, the ones that stood out for their multifunctional approach, and the ones that were most committed to innovation as the best means of addressing future challenges. Within this context, the COVID-19 pandemic has proved to be a disruptive episode, accelerating processes which were previously barely noticed and opening a new debate within society on hitherto unimagined challenges and priorities.

The increased concern about health and the healthy has opened a window of opportunity for those areas which can meet the conditions of quality of life, endogenous resources and connectivity required for the development of projects. Within this framework, “territorial anchoring” is confirmed as an important value in the face of globalized models that are costlier in both economic and environmental terms, and which not only create dependence, but also, in certain extreme situations, can result in supply shortages. In general, in all the spaces we studied, there is a history of industrial development based on their endogenous potential. For example, some of the most successful projects have been based on the transformation of agricultural, livestock and forestry products, by adapting, improving and expanding traditional activities and production methods, introducing the relevant technical advances and developing them to the full to meet the needs of growing markets, which are increasingly more demanding. This wide range of endogenous industries have extraordinary pull and push capacities and could be one of the great tractor forces in rural areas.

In addition, in the current market situation, the farm and forestry sector would seem to have great potential which must be exploited, above all by focusing on high-quality produce and sustainable practices, so fomenting new forms of production and consumption. These products could be integrated into local and regional circuits, and into proximity consumption and distribution circuits, which without doubt would help develop other sectors such as tourism and retail.

This great business potential is reinforced by the strong involvement and deep-rootedness of the economic agents in the territory. The fact that the business fabric

has deep roots is very important and although it does not always guarantee that the next generation will take over the reins, their links with the territory and its resources are of great value, both due to the existence of raw materials and because of the tradition, culture and wisdom they inherit.

4.2 Specific Studies

In order to corroborate these conclusions, we present three case studies of successful projects financed by LEADER involving the valorization of agri-food and forestry products from Castilla y León. To this end, we selected projects that were carried out in territories that were not included in the original base study, in order to find out whether the same pattern could be observed in other LAG areas (Fig. 3). Nonetheless, we decided to maintain a diverse range of representative areas in social and environmental terms: mountain regions, highlands and plains. We also selected projects centred on unconventional uses, particularly of mountain and upland areas. They all fulfilled criteria linked to their territorial anchoring, their impact on the value chain associated with cultivation, harvesting and transformation and their multifunctional character, and were all examples of business activities that generate employment for local workers. These case studies also had innovative aspects, not only in terms of the originality of the product itself, but also in terms of the methods applied in the sustainable management and organization of the production, with particular reference to the actors involved and their positive effects on the territories (food transformation companies, promotion of tourism) and the local population (employment in general and for women and young people in particular). These projects stood out above all because the indicator of their success, as emphasized in the interviews with those involved, was that they were the culmination of an enduring lifelong project.

4.2.1 A Group of Women Form an Association to Prepare Highland Products and Set up a Restaurant Business: Cooperativa Del Monte De Tabuyo

In the shade of Mt. Teleno (2188 m high), with high ridges and massifs, poor soils and valleys rutted by rivers with low water levels, especially in the summer months, at high altitude (982 m) and with sufficient rainfall for a generous development of plant and animal life and dense Mediterranean pine forest (*Pinus pinaster*) vegetation lies the village of Tabuyo (217 inhabitants), part of the municipality of Luyego (562 inhabitants in 2022).

In 2003, five women from the village set up a cooperative with LEADER funding. The cooperative, called “Del Monte de Tabuyo”, specializes in the cultivation of raspberries, a product traditionally picked in this area, and mushrooms, which have long been picked in local forests and are now also grown directly on bales of straw. The idea for a cooperative was based on an ancient custom known as “la facendera”

applied in this area since time immemorial, in which the community came together to work for the common good. This traditional model inspired them to set up a cooperative in which the five women contributed the skills that each one knew best: some in the kitchen and the restaurant; others in the field, or in the management and publicizing of the business.

Their initial objective was to create employment for local women, who had been hit hard by the crisis in the textile cooperatives in the area. The promoters also wanted to take advantage of local know-how and craftsmanship converted into high-quality preserved foods and restaurant dishes. For these purposes, they developed a system based on a sustainable approach learnt from the traditional uses of the surrounding hills and forests. This involves full control of the production process in that the women sow, cultivate, harvest and cook all the products until they are ready to be packed for sale. Another outlet for these products is the restaurant they opened in the village, where they serve their own products as part of local cuisine.

They have quite a diverse range of activities from the organic cultivation of mushrooms and raspberries to the transformation, bottling or canning of different vegetables cultivated or picked by the members of the cooperative; their direct sale online and their direct consumption in an innovative restaurant, with a menu based on local products, prepared and cooked by the women themselves.

The cooperative has managed to breathe new life and economic dynamism into a forgotten corner of the Montes de León that has also been severely battered by frequent forest fires that have put its ecological balance and its economic and social development in jeopardy. The initiative has had a magnet-type effect encouraging others to carry out projects in the village, so creating synergies and new lines of business. Their deep roots in the territory are also manifested in their support for and collaboration with other companies and initiatives in the village. These include the setting up of a second restaurant (La Casa del Herrero) and of the Tabuyo Mycological Interpretation Centre, promoted by Luyego Local Council and the Montañas del Teleno LAG in 2005. The Interpretation Centre offers guided mushroom-related routes and encourages visitors to try the dishes based on mushrooms offered by the two restaurants. New cooperatives have also sprung up such as "Pinaster", which offers a range of services from the extraction of resin from local pine trees, to environmental management and dissemination. They have forged a good relationship with the day centre for elderly people in the village, which has led to further employment opportunities for women. In this way, they are helping reduce the exodus of women from rural areas, a fate to which they previously seemed destined.

In addition, their commitment to environmental sustainability has led them to take decisions such as installing a biomass boiler when they discovered that the offcuts from pruning the pine forest were not used for anything. With this boiler, they were able to cover a large amount of their heating and energy needs. Their example has been followed by the school, a few private houses and a new hostel, which have also installed these boilers. Other moves towards sustainability include the cultivation of mushrooms on straw bales, which after harvest are burnt in the biomass boiler.

The cooperative now has quite a long and successful history, so much so that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fishing, Food and the Rural and Marine Environment

awarded it the First Prize in a competition held to mark World Environment Day in 2010. Apart from the important financial boost (10,000 €), this prize also gave them additional encouragement and optimism to consolidate and extend their project in Tabuyo, and to continue to innovate with new products such as “Leeks in a raspberry and dill marinade”, which won a prize at the 28th edition of the León Local Products Fair in the Long Duration Perishable Products category.

Initiatives of this kind undoubtedly impact on the general dynamics of the village and its surrounding area and to a large extent are responsible for the positive evolution of the village of Tabuyo. The enhancement of the value of the landscape, hiking and orienteering routes in the mountains, nature and gastronomic tourism are all factors which undoubtedly stimulate the positive dynamic in this rural area. Although it is now very difficult to revert the demographic decline in the village, given the already ageing population, there is no doubt that the Del Monte de Tabuyo Cooperative has breathed new life into the area, providing economic activity and attractions in a forgotten part of deep rural Spain that needs more initiatives of this kind.

4.2.2 Valorization of the Holly Branches Cut During Pruning of the Holly Woods in the Province of Soria: El Acebarillo

The small socio-territorial scale at which some good rural development initiatives are carried out in depopulated areas is magnified by the qualitative value of their success, according to criteria that go beyond purely economic results. A good example of this is El Acebarillo, a limited company with five partners, most of whom are women, which since 2002 has been commercializing holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) branches for ornamental purposes. These branches are produced during pruning of the holly wood known as the Acebal de Garagüeta. This wood is on common land used traditionally by local people for grazing cattle and covers 406 hectares in the municipality of Arévalo de la Sierra, in the north-eastern corner of the province of Soria at the foot of the mountains known as the Sierra de Montes Claros in the Cordillera Ibérica. Of this total area, about 180 hectares are monospecific holly woods, forming the largest, best conserved pure mass of holly forest in the Iberian Peninsula. El Acebarillo is based in the tiny hamlet of Torrearévalo (30 inhabitants, 21 men and 9 women), which belongs to the municipality of Arévalo de la Sierra, which according to the continuous census for 2022 has a total population of 72 in its three separate settlements. In this remote mountainous area situated in the outer fringes of Castilla y León, marked by an aging, declining population and an almost exclusively livestock-based economy, the business activity of El Acebarillo combines various important aspects of sustainable rural development: innovation with territorial anchoring, diversification, self-managed job creation and dissemination of the model.

This project is interesting first of all because it innovates on the back of tradition. It promotes the appreciation of holly branches and their commercial value as a subproduct of controlled pruning. The holly is sold in two formats: as branches selected for sale to florists, and as handcrafted floral decorations such as table centrepieces, wreaths, garlands and bouquets. The economic returns from this activity

have encouraged interest in the sustainable use and conservation of the Acebal de Garagüeta Nature Reserve. This is an outstanding natural space which is protected because of its environmental value although its most important heritage value is cultural. The mass of holly trees as a monospecific, cleared (*dehesa*) hillside has an anthropic origin in livestock farming, in that for centuries it has been used as a place for working animals, in particular oxen, to rest and as pasture till today. Pruning offcuts are also used traditionally as firewood and as animal feed. Due to the functional origin of these holly woods, the Regional Government of Castilla y León identifies depopulation as one the main threats to their conservation, together with the abandonment of grazing and the resulting rewilding and mixture due to the invasion of scrub and other tree species. As a result, the controlled pruning of holly branches ensures a beneficial use of the holly wood, while maintaining the gaps between the trees and its unusual status as a pure mass of holly forest.

Confined exclusively to autumn and winter, the seasonality of the pruning and of its core business limited the development of El Acebarillo. An additional difficulty was that, at the beginning, holly was a protected species in Castilla y León (from 1984), due to pressures from conservationist groups who, unaware of these good traditional uses, made generic claims about the risks involved in the excessive uncontrolled cutting of holly in other areas of the country. This was a severe blow for the parts of the province of Soria in the northeast of the Cordillera Ibérica, who since the 1950s had been obtaining additional income with the sale of ornamental holly branches at Christmas time. This led to a loss of interest in the woods and their resulting neglect. In the region, the prohibition to cut and sell holly as a Christmas decoration, which for decades had been disguised as “forest maintenance”, prevented the company from promoting itself locally and made publicizing it to the outside world much more difficult, due to the increased cost of shipments and the bad press that the product received. The determination of the local councils that the sustainable management of the holly woods should be recognized eventually paid off in 2015 when the holly ceased to be a protected species in the region (Law 4/2015 on the Natural Heritage of Castilla y León) (Junta de Castilla y León, 2015). The change in the law was justified by “the evident improvement in the state of conservation of the species” and the fact that its survival was now guaranteed.

In this way, the pioneering work done by El Acebarillo and its repeated protests ultimately consolidated the possibility of commercializing the holly as an endogenous resource whose exploitation contributes to the effective conservation of the holly woods. In order to guarantee this, the company operates with an AENOR Quality Certificate of Sustainable Forestry Management using the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) system (Norma UNE 162002). The Eco-label “Acebo de Garagüeta”—a trademark registered by Arévalo de la Sierra Local Council—certifies that the holly comes from a forest with carefully controlled pruning and forestry work.

Another important decision taken by the company was to ensure its functional diversification, breaking the confines imposed by the very short season of its core business by encouraging tourism and attracting visitors to the holly wood (over 34,000 visitors in 2022). Since 2004, El Acebarillo has offered leisure activities

that have helped dynamize the local economy. Since 2014, these services have been linked to the Acebal de Garagüeta Park House, which was opened that year by the Regional Government of Castilla y León in Arévalo de la Sierra (about 6000 visits in 2022). The company which was awarded the management of the house, offers active tourism activities such as guided hiking routes through the holly wood and its surrounding area, night-time walks in the summer to see the stars, talks and workshops on environmental education, courses explaining how to care for holly and holly-related craftwork, etc. Lastly, the diverse range of activities and services managed by the company is completed by the offer of a whole house for rent in Torrearévalo.

The success of this business project also has an important social value in terms of the jobs created and managed locally, above all of women and young people in an area which is at critical risk of depopulation. The company, which has five partners, provides one permanent position and 15 to 20 seasonal jobs in the busiest period. The holly branches are handcrafted and sold throughout Spain directly with no intermediaries, via telephone or online orders. During the Christmas season, holly can also be purchased directly in Torrearévalo or at a stall in the Christmas Market in the provincial capital, Soria.

The good use being made of the Garagüeta Holly Wood and the good management practices applied by the company El Acebarillo have been quite well publicized, leading to actions aimed at replicating this experience in other nearby holly woods. With this in mind, two of the LAGs in the province of Soria in this area, Proynerso and Asociación Pinares del Valle (Asopiva), combined to launch the Acebalia project. This project has two main objectives, namely to inform local people about the business possibilities of this resource (holly-related craft work and tourism) and to raise their awareness regarding the sustainability of the product and the social benefits it can provide. The positive results include the expansion of the Garagüeta model to other *dehesas*, the creation of other companies working with holly and holly woods (Senda Viva in San Pedro Manrique and houses for rural tourism), cooperation between the different subregions, the “Soria Holly” (Acebo de Soria) stamp to certify its origin and a continuous increase in sales.

These good decisions have earned El Acebarillo some important prizes and awards, such as the “Fuentes Claras” Regional Environment Prize awarded by the Regional Government of Castilla y León (2007), citing its value as a successful project in small villages with a high risk of depopulation. The Prize for Excellence in Innovation for Rural Women offered by the Ministry of the Environment and the Rural and Marine Medium (2010); and the “Castilla y León Rural Businesswomen” Prize awarded by the Families Department of the Regional Government of Castilla y León (2018), in recognition of the entrepreneurship and self-employment of women in rural areas that result in economic and social dynamization.

4.2.3 Innovation and Multifunctionality in the Cultivation of Aromatic Plants: Tiedra De Lavanda/Eco-Lavanda

Tiedra, a municipality in the province of Valladolid (Castilla y León) which in 2022 had a population of 289 (145 men and 144 women), is situated in the southwestern end of the mountains of Torozos, on the edge of the largely barren limestone plains in the sedimentary basin of the River Duero, which opens onto the Campo de Toro. This region is made up of flat plains with loose limestone soils. It suffers extreme variations in temperature and has low average annual rainfall, turning particularly arid in the summer. Due to these environmental characteristics, its farmers have traditionally specialized in rainfed cereals, vines and almond trees. The area was also known for sheep farming. The animals grazed in the uncultivated fields, rich in aromatic plants (camomile, sage, spike lavender, yellow immortelle, borage, common thyme, *thymus zygis*, marjoram, rosemary or lavender), which were traditionally collected by camomile pickers, herb collectors and apothecaries. The productivist approach behind the traditional farming model accentuated specialization and business concentration in agriculture with the resulting effects in terms of unemployment and depopulation. However, for the last two decades the municipality has become known for the high density of projects financed by the Zona Centro de Valladolid Local Action Group, and its economic structure has been diversified with the setting up of companies in the biofuels, tourism and agri-food sectors.

One of the most important projects involves the cultivation of aromatic plants. It has been particularly successful in terms of its effects on employment and its capacity to create synergies with other business activities. The promoters of this project are a family with strong roots in the municipality, who were concerned about how to maintain a traditional rainfed farm that was facing serious difficulties with doubts as to whether it could continue remaining viable via conventional farming. They therefore decided to take a new direction, to start up an innovative business called Aromáticas del Duero, a limited company which was set up in 2006 and specializes in the cultivation of spices, aromatic, medicinal and pharmaceutical plants. It is managed by a male entrepreneur whose original experience was in the forestry sector. This agro-industrial initiative is an alternative to the conventional cereal-growing model and consists of the planting and transformation of aromatic plants (hybrids between lavender and “lavandín” another hybrid) in Tiedra and its surrounding area. This idea was rooted in the local tradition of collecting aromatic plants in the uncultivated lands and hillsides of Torozos (herb pickers), but was completely innovative in terms of its end product as these plants had never been cultivated for the purpose of extracting their aromatic essences. Lavender is a pluri-annual crop, which requires an important initial investment but can remain in production for several years with acceptable returns, making it a reasonable alternative to the dominant rainfed cultivation of cereals. However, it must be transformed relatively quickly via steam distillation to obtain the essential oils which are then commercialized in the chemical, natural cosmetics, perfume, cleaning and disinfection industries on Spanish and international markets. This is why the investment in a distillery in 2008, financed by the Zona Centro de Valladolid LAG was an important milestone. The new plant had

the greatest production capacity in the whole region and one of the largest in Spain and enabled them to further develop the business to offer agronomy and marketing services to other farmers in the area (selecting the most suitable varieties, planting, care, harvesting, joint distillery and sale). From its initial stages, when there were just a few dozen hectares in the municipality of Tiedra, they have now expanded to cultivating over 400 hectares scattered across the whole province providing employment for one permanent member of staff and six other temporary workers.

The company is constantly innovating, opening the door to “bio” products in the cosmetics range. One of its most successful achievements in terms of initiative and innovation is that from the highly masculinized agro-industrial base of the initial project, it later developed a second, quite different project: Eco-Lavanda, a limited company that organizes and manages a Lavender Interpretation Centre in the same village opened in 2018. This enabled them not only to grow and diversify the business but also to introduce new elements which would be key factors in its success: leadership and innovation.

Diversification is associated, firstly, with the launch of new products which are commercialized either online or in the interpretation centre, which has a shop which sells dried flowers, soaps, pouches, bouquets, essential oils, handicrafts and liqueurs. But above all it is due to Tiedra de Lavanda, 2019, the first interpretation centre in Spain devoted to the world of lavender (varieties, history, culture, tradition, manufacturing processes, products, etc.) financed with LEADER funds by the Valladolid Zona Centro LAG. Its aims include education, dissemination and consultancy, but above all it promotes active tourism. The Tiedra de Lavanda Interpretation Centre organizes participative activities at different times of the year and specific programmes for groups (free or guided visits), which include walks through the lavender fields, workshops, demonstrations, courses or talks. In this way, they enhance the value of intangible resources such as the landscape. In July and August, the flowering lavender offers a strong visual contrast with the cereal fields, scorched yellow by the summer heat, so creating a highly expressive landscape with enormous aesthetic and sensory (visual, aromatic) appeal, which explains why increasing numbers of tourists are visiting the area and sharing pictures of it on social networks.

From a leadership point of view, the tourism side of the business is run by a businesswoman from the other side of the family, who had previously worked in education and training in the public sector. She decided to set up this business, not only because of its business potential, but also because of her local roots, as a means of dynamizing the village and the surrounding area (the business employs three people, also women, during the period of most visits in the summer months when the lavender is in bloom), in a context in which other businesses were also being set up (tourism centre, astronomical observatory, etc.).

The creation of new businesses enabled them to build alliances and create synergies with fellow entrepreneurs. This is what happened, for example, with honey producers in that the flowering of the lavender attracts beehive owners from far and wide. A large honey-production company (Setentaynueve, Mieleros de Tiedra) has been set up in the same village. The shop sells this single-flower lavender honey

with its own brand: Tiedra Trágame. They also organize weekly relaxation workshops combining mindfulness and lavender, run by professionals hired for these purposes. Lastly, they collaborate regularly with complementary businesses, either in the village itself (astronomical observatory, equestrian tourism or restaurants) or in the surrounding area.

All of this results in a successful initiative which attracts more and more tourists and which has earned it institutional recognition from the Valladolid Provincial Council. In 2002, the project was awarded the Valladolid Province Tourism Prize for its contribution to the promotion and positioning of the province as a tourist destination. It also recognized the importance of a project in developing a business sector which combines values of respect for the environment and the rural world.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

In this chapter we assess some of the best-known, most widely copied and furthest-reaching projects financed within the framework of the LEADER LAGs in Castilla y León, and in particular within the context of the enhancement of the value of agri-food and forestry products. Our analysis revealed at least three common characteristics which formed the basis of their success.

The first is their territorial anchoring, in other words their close relationship and strong roots in the territory where the project is being implemented. This refers back on the one hand to the role played by the local context, with its resources and potentialities, as an active asset in the processes which lead to success based on their singularity and competitive advantages. In addition, at a more specifically agrarian level, territorial anchoring can form part of a strategy to halt the trend towards the delocalization of modern-day agrarian production systems associated with the standardization of production methods and globalized consumption (Ilbery, 2001). In this case, the process of territorial anchoring is reinforced in order to promote the opposite trend, i.e. relocation, with tight links between the product and the place where it is made. The coexistence of two quite different forms of agri-food production is becoming progressively established in Europe today: on the one hand a globalized, highly capitalized industrial approach, and on the other a form of farming based on territorial roots, which applies multifunctional strategies of product diversification (Ramirez et al., 2016). The territorial anchoring of products and the spatial differentiation of agri-food systems are strengthened and acquire added value when associated with images of the place and with its cultural identity. This enables them to occupy a particular niche in the market, as compared to products which are presented to the consumer in a standardized homogeneous way. This added value is reinforced by other accompanying attributes such as on the one hand, environmental, economic and social sustainability, and on the other, healthiness, values which became much more important as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. For all these reasons, it is not surprising that the conversion of food products and their production contexts (agricultural landscapes) into heritage has opened up very promising paths towards

rural development in both dynamic and more marginal contexts. In Castilla y León, as in other rural areas of Europe, different strategies for the territorialization of food have been gathering strength. These have been recognized at an institutional level in various different ways (Martínez-Arnáiz et al., 2022), and have been differentiated from more standardized products due to the unusual methods applied in their production and in their sales and marketing (consumer networks, short distribution channels, etc.).

Linked to the above, another common feature of these case studies is multifunctionality. This has two main dimensions: intrinsic (pertaining to the agri-food systems) and extrinsic (pertaining to the territories that define and host them) (Silva Pérez, 2010). Looking beyond the production of raw materials and/or agricultural, livestock or forestry-based food products, and even the forms and approaches applied in primary sector production processes, new functions are being triggered when resources that have not always been considered as marketable assets are successfully harnessed. It is not only a question of increasing the value chain of a particular product, but also of incorporating new actors and of getting complementary activities of the ground. In 1999, in a report for the Special Committee on Agriculture, the European Commission defined the basic functions of the primary sector in Europe as follows: “the production of raw materials and foodstuffs in competitive conditions (and its consequences for European food safety), the conservation of the environment and the rural landscape and the contribution to the viability of rural areas and to balanced territorial development” (Atance Muñiz & Tió Saralegui, 2000). In this sense, the externalities generated in the territory by farming itself are especially important, understood as public goods or services which could increase in value via their integration into the market. Among these assets, landscape must play a fundamental role in that as a synthesis of cultural and natural relations, it can encompass a wide range of “cultural, ecological, environmental and social aspects of all the different territories and in particular of rural areas, so becoming a crucial factor for the development of different activities including tourism” (Cañizares Ruiz & Ruiz Pulpón, 2020).

This capacity for integrating intangible assets such as landscape and other ecosystem assets into the value chain is very closely linked to another determining factor in the success of projects: innovation. The Oslo manual, an essential bibliographical reference in this field, defines innovation as “a new or improved product or process (or combination thereof) that differs significantly from the unit’s previous products or processes and that has been made available to potential users (product) or brought into use by the unit (process)”. In its more social dimension, it emphasizes the objective of “improving the welfare of people and communities” (OECD-Eurostat, 2018). This is why, in the processes leading to territorial development, a decisive role is played by economic and social innovation, understood as the capacity to work together for common objectives. In this sense,—together with public policies of support such as the funds managed by the LAGs among others—there are other spatial factors such as location, the good government of the territory, social and environmental factors or flows of knowledge and markets. A question that is closely

related with the principles of an innovative environment, in that economic innovation is a geographically located and socially interactive process in which agents of different kinds participate (in production, research, training, regulation, promotion, etc.), and contribute both tangible and intangible resources (Aparicio et al., 2008). Innovation can be assessed in terms of whether the actions taken in favour of the community or the territory have been applied there in the past, in reference to both the product and the method, to the market or the social sector from which these actions emerge or at which they are aimed. In this case, a conceptual instrument from the field of regional economy becomes particularly significant, namely the “social spaces of innovation” in which the problems of the territory could themselves become a source of innovation through co-creation processes in which various different stakeholders are involved (Hernández Navarro et al., 2013). We can also talk about innovation in relation to the new agents who are prepared to take action in support of the development of their local territory. It is important to emphasize the leadership provided by women, especially young women, in many of the successful case stories, in which they have discovered new ways of using local resources with strong territorial roots.

In order to mitigate or reverse the processes of demographic decline in rural areas in regions such as Castilla y León, decision-makers will have to make all the sector-based policies converge in the common goal of rural development without excluding farming and forestry. At the same time, priority should be given to alternative agri-food and forestry models that break away from the traditional ones with which they will necessarily have to coexist. Models that are primarily based on sustainable, high-quality products. Economically and socially dynamic systems activate innovation and multifunctionality on the basis of the differentiation provided by territorial anchoring and the incorporation of new components into the value chain such as agricultural and ecological heritage or the landscape.

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When Project-Based Rural Development Undermines Meaningful Activity—A Narrative Interpretation of Project Experiences in Finland



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Abstract This article addresses projectification as a form of rural development and the criticisms levelled against it at local community level in Finland. It seeks to understand what is behind the negative attitudes of some local actors towards rural development projects and the role played by LEADER LAGs in the projectified rural development scene. The article assesses the opinions expressed by local, governmental and LAG actors about projects as a form of rural development through the Finnish case study. The data came from the open-ended answers provided by local actors who took part in a nationwide survey of village action (2010) and 12 thematic interviews conducted with LAG managers and governmental actors. The analysis draws on narrative organizational analysis as a research method. The criticisms of this project-based form of development relate to frustration with cumbersome rules and excessive bureaucracy, factors that were also highlighted in earlier studies. Our results suggest that there is deep-rooted structural tension between local and governmental actors, which comes to the fore in local development projects. The perceived unity of local experience-based development activity is eroded when it comes up against the normative and regulated project process. This structural tension justifies the function of mediating actors like the LAGs. The mediating work of the LAGs is essential in smoothening the relationship between the two worlds apart: the normative and the lived experience of local actors. The LAG strategies act as competencies that bring these two worlds together.

Keywords Projectification · Rural development · LEADER approach · LAG · Narrative analysis · Finland

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1 Introduction

Programme-based development policies, such as the European Union rural development programme of which the LEADER approach forms part are largely built on projects as a form of development. Projects are by no means a unique feature of rural development, on the contrary, projectification has spread across both the private and public spheres over the past decades. Projects are an omnipresent part of the economy, government and beyond, thus sparking concepts such as the project society (Jensen et al., 2016).

Different actors can have different understandings as to what the word “project” actually means and different expectations as to the benefits it may provide. Although rural development projects undeniably bring funding and other temporary resources to rural communities, they are not always welcomed with open arms. Projects represent a new form of organizing and governing which brings potential tensions between the different actors’ interests and priorities (why), agendas (what) and required skills and methods (how). These differences and sources of conflict have been noted in studies of projects (e.g. Geraldi & Söderlund, 2018) and rural sociology alike (e.g. Kovách & Kučerová, 2006).

In connection to rural research in Finland, an extensive national survey covering the village association actors in 2010 revealed criticisms and dissatisfaction with projects (Hyyryläinen et al., 2011). Most of these projects were funded by the LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs), who reserve ample resources for place-based initiatives through their local strategies, which in turn, form part of the Rural Development Programme (RDP) for Mainland Finland. This critical attitude towards projects was rather surprising, given that LEADER action is generally well-received in rural municipalities and local communities.

This article thus seeks to investigate the mixed experiences and interpretations of projects as a way of organizing place-based development action. The empirical data focuses on project-based rural development from the perspectives of local village actors, LAG managers and the decentralized government officials at the *Centres for Economic Development, Transport, and the Environment* (ELY centres), who are responsible for managing the RDPs in the different regions of Finland. Hereafter, we will be referring to local rural actors as *local actors* and to the representatives of the ELY centres as *governmental actors*. The actors associated with the LEADER approach are either LAG managers, LAG board members or other LAG actors depending on the context.

The purpose of this article is to gain a better understanding of the criticisms levelled by local actors at rural development projects as a means of development and the position of the LAGs in this projectified rural development scene. By way of conclusion, we briefly address what can be learned from the Finnish experience of projectified rural development in the LEADER context.

In this article, the experiences of the local actors, LAG managers and governmental actors are examined through the concepts and ideas of narrative analysis.

The narrative scheme proposed by François Cooren (2000) provides a framework for structuring and analyzing the data.

We will begin by briefly discussing the concepts around project society and projectification in the context of rural development. Drawing from the work of semio-narrative organization researchers, we sketch how differentiating between the normative and narrative project interpretation would help us understand the tensions that arise in relation to projects and shed light on the dilemmas surrounding projects as a form of development. In order to understand the empirical context, rural Finland, we devote one section to describing rural development actors and activities in Finland, particularly at the local level. After presenting the data, analysis and results, the last part will be devoted to the conclusions and discussion.

2 Theoretical Background

The sociologists Luc Boltanski and Éve Chiapello argue that a major social change is underway, as a result of which a new social norm is being established from the network, and from the concept of network, a general description model of the community. The network society is itself based on individual projects, which in turn form the basis for the local establishment of wider networks. The project is the reason for forming relationships and it brings different people together and unites them for a certain period of time by establishing relationships in the form of project organizations. (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, pp. 104–105, 135).

Project organizations have emerged in the public administration in all advanced liberal societies. It has been claimed for decades that projects effectively engineer the changes required in the public sector (Birchall & Lyons, 1995; Peters & Pierre, 2004). In connection to rural development, (Ray, 2001) argues that the welfare state is being transformed as new forms of intervention give rise to a project-based, endogenous territorial development system.

The explosion of projects at all levels of governance (Jalocha, 2019) and across all sectors—the projectification of everything (Jensen et al., 2016)—is a multi-faceted phenomenon sparked by multiple pull and push factors (Lundin, 2016). As mentioned, a common pull effect is the hope of making public sector operations more effective and dynamic (Godenhjelm et al., 2015). On the push effect side, the perfect example is the European Union funding programmes, which are closely integrated into the project approach. Interestingly, as noted by Lundin (2016), the EU also prescribes which project model to use by means of its guides and application forms.

In the field of rural studies, (Kováč & Kučerová, 2006) highlight the invasion of projects and the rapid increase in the demand for related project skills and capabilities. Projects, together with the demand for local expertise and the mobilization of social capital, are contributing to the restructuring of local power and the emergence of a new “project class”.

Endogenous (or more recently neo-endogenous) rural development policy is best manifested in the LEADER approach. (Gkartzios & Lowe, 2019; Ray, 1999, 2000). Ever since it was first launched in the early 1990s, the LEADER approach has been embedded in networks (e.g. Lowe et al., 1995)—an essential dimension of projectification. LEADER projects should, in theory, be “bottom-up” and inclusive, but this is not always the case (Navarro et al., 2016) and although they are designed to encourage innovation (Dargan & Shucksmith, 2008), their implementation is often restrained by practices that curb innovation (Dax et al., 2016).

As the *LEADER* approach is made up of thousands and thousands of local projects, it is also an interesting window on the “rural project society”. In terms of numbers, approximately 6900 million € of European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) funding was made available to the LEADER scheme in EU-27 in the latest programming period 2014–2020 (ENRD, n.d.-a) and approximately 2800 LAGs across Europe mobilized thousands and thousands of projects in their respective territories (ENRD, n.d.-b).

There are many partly overlapping names for studies on projects. The list of terms and concepts is long and includes among others: project organizing, project-led organizations, project-based organizing, project networks, programme management, project portfolio management, project society, projectification, programmification and project ecologies. Each term offers a new perspective on the common phenomena (Gerald & Söderlund, 2018).

Gerardi & Söderlund (2018) made an analytical overview of the different kinds of studies on projects. The different types of project studies were identified by juxtaposing Habermas’ theory of knowledge-constitutive interests (technical, interpretive and emancipatory) with levels of project studies that ranged from focusing on individual projects to focusing on micro- and macro-level concerns. The resulting matrix offers nine areas in which to position research contributions and identify less populated cells in the grid. Although research on projects has grown across all types and levels, the historical emphasis has been on the technical interest, while the critical and emancipatory interests have so far received less attention.

3 Normative and Narrative Outlooks on Projects

In his dissertation, a Finnish linguist, Pekka Uotila (2011), offered an intriguing exploration of the organization of project planning (process) from the perspective of (critical) organizational discourse analysis by applying above all what is known as “narrative analysis of organization” (e.g. Cooren, 2000). Uotila classified this repertoire of interpretations within the critical, postmodernist line of organization studies. In the following, we briefly introduce the key concepts and ideas to understand the line of conceptualization in the context of rural development studies.

To take a narrative outlook on projects, one first needs to adopt a working definition of the word “project”. For these purposes, “project” will be understood here simply as a “short-term organization”. Of course, “project” has many other definitions. There

are a vast set of good project attributes and a myriad of books about how a project should be designed, managed, implemented or evaluated. Besides the management literature, these norms are set out, for example, in guidebooks, manuals or online services related to different funding sources. According to Uotila (2011, p. 56), all such project-related texts and artefacts can be summarized as project macrodiscourse. The prevailing macrodiscourse on projects is of a normative nature, i.e. it seeks to define the “right way to think about projects and project organization”.

Uotila (2011, pp. 56–57) summarizes the project characteristics presented in the normative project discourse into four typical features: (1) The project is presented as an independent entity, described as a life cycle or a machine. (2) The project is characterized by technicality, the possibility of turning actions into measurable and controllable units. (3) The project is an efficient agent of change, whose connection to development is seen as self-evident. (4) The conflict sensitivity of the projects is recognized and acknowledged.

Alongside the predominantly normative (macro) discourse on projects, there is also the everyday world of experience around projects and the related practices and texts, which, according to Uotila (2011, p. 19), could be referred to as project microdiscourse. The notion of numerous microdiscourses related to projects offers an insight into the narrative project interpretation.

In the narrative project interpretation, the focus is on peoples’ experience, actions, the relationships between actors, texts and their interpretation. The narrative approach sees the project either as an independent line of action or as an agent representing another agency acting on someone’s behalf in a world that is constantly growing and taking shape. The project is built from several different actions and episodes, so making the unequivocal delimitation of the project inappropriate (Uotila, 2011, pp. 221–224).

In the narrative project interpretation, the linguistic structures of (project) organization play a central role and this is where the theories of the Montréal school of communication¹ (Cooren, 2000, 2001; Cooren & Taylor, 1997) come in to play. The narrative approach, which is also referred to as a semio-narrative or socio-semiotic analysis, draws on Austin’s (1999) early theorizing on speech acts and Greimasian (1987) semiotics (Cooren, 2000).

A central concept and analytical tool in the semio-narrative approach is the narrative schema. According to (Cooren, 2000), the schema is a prototypic model for understanding organization, how it is built and maintained. It consists of consecutive phases which are associated with actions typical of each phase (modalities) and the exchange of certain discursive objects. Table 1 presents the phases, actions and discursive objects of the schema, as pulled together by Cooren (2001).

The schema is always structured between the beginning and the end situation. The actors, possible conflicts, goals and problems are described in the initial situation. The narrative starts with an issue or deficiency in a particular state of affairs, which is resolved by possible actions to eliminate it. The action is articulated in the form of a speech act named “directive”—the direction to take—in the manipulation stage

¹ Many of the authors are associated with the communication program at the University of Montréal.

Table 1 Narrative schema with the actions and discursive objects subject to exchanges

Phase of narrative	Type of modality	Type of speech act
Manipulation	Have to do	Directive
Commitment	Want to do	Commissive
Competence	Can do/be able to do	Declarative
Performance	Do	Accreditive/Informative
Sanction	Recognition	Expressive

Following (Cooren, 2001, p. 283)

of the schema. The directive has a recipient to whom it is addressed. If the recipient actor accepts the directive, (s)he undertakes to implement it and receives recognition in the end. However, there is also a chance that the recipient rejects the directive (Cooren, 2000; Cooren & Taylor, 1997).

In between the initial and end situation, (Cooren, 2000, 2001) differentiates between the manipulation (“Have to do”), commitment (“Want to do”), competence (“Can do”) and performance (“Do”) stages. The last phase is the sanction phase involving recognition of the performance. As the consecutive stages resemble the idea of the dramatic arc, narrativity then refers to what is discovered and made explicit during the course of the analysis. The principles in the application of the model include: (1) All speech acts are performances that produce—or seek to produce—transformations. (2) Narratives operate according to the principle of exchange. (3) Narrative tells one story and one point of view at a time. (4) The hero of one story can be the anti-hero in another story about the same events.

In socio-semiotic narrative analysis, the object of analysis can be any text (or excerpt from a text) of human origin. The texts for analysis need not make up a story or narrative in themselves. (Boje, 2001, p. 1). Moreover, narrative analysis also accepts the concept of nonhuman agency. In other words, organizing is more than just what the human members do, and, in line with Latour, the study of organization should be expanded to include the effects of nonhuman actions (Cooren, 2004).

The narrative schema is useful for studying projects because they have traditionally (in the normative literature) been associated with a life cycle. Like the narrative schema, the project too, is constructed as a continuum of different phases. The narrative schema has a descriptive perspective, so it does not actually determine the discourse, and instead presents a way of understanding communication (Fisher, 1989, p. 66).

4 The Context and Rural Development in Finland

Finland is the northernmost country in the EU with a population of 5.7 million inhabitants and a total surface area of 338,000 sq-km². In 2017, there were 1.6 million people (28% off the total) living in areas officially classified as rural (Maaseutukat-saus, 2017). According to several indicators, Finland is among the most rural countries in Europe. According to the OECD definitions of rural areas, Finland ranks fifth in terms of the share of its territory covered by predominantly rural regions (89%), and second in terms of both the population that it hosts (53%) and the GDP produced within these regions (45%) (OECD, 2008).²

The programme-based development policy and the related development approach through projects have been strongly reflected in Finnish rural development activity since the 1990's (Hyyryläinen & Rannikko, 2000, p. 189). The theory and practice of Finnish rural policy falls somewhere between agricultural and regional policy and draws on both national and EU resources. It aims to enhance a broad spectrum of living conditions and livelihoods in rural areas.

The LEADER approach has been considered the most important instrument of rural development in Finland ever since it joined the EU in 1995. The LEADER approach was expanded to cover all rural areas of Finland (with additional national funding) as early as 1997 (Pylkkänen & Hyyryläinen, 2004). The driving force and resources behind LAG operations in Finland have been long-standing village activities, i.e. self-funded local activities for the benefit of the village and the surrounding area.

Some researchers (Hyyryläinen et al., 2011) argue that LAGs were able to establish themselves quickly in Finland mainly because village activities already had time to expand nationwide in the 1980s. In this way, the idea of planned development and joint action had become familiar to many local actors through their own village activity experiences even before LEADER activities began (ibid.). Interestingly, rural research in other countries has also highlighted the importance of preexisting social resources in triggering civic action via the LEADER approach (Kinsella et al., 2010).

The LAGs operate at the interface between rural civil society, local business life, the municipalities (local councils) and the governmental actors in the regions. The overall mission of the LAGs is to activate tangible and intangible local resources for place-based development.

In the programming period 2014–2020 there were 54 LAGs across Finland covering practically all areas classified as rural in the Finnish area typology. Approximately 6000 small business grants and 6000 non-profit rural development projects were financed under the RDP for Mainland Finland. Almost half of these projects were financed within the framework of LAG strategies via co-operation projects, small-scale investments and capacity building measures (MMM, 2021).

² The OECD classification of rural areas—and hence the rural population—is different from the Finnish one. In practice, many areas that are classified as “urban” in the detailed Finnish geospatial classification are considered as “rural” in the OECD approach.

The total public funding framework for the LEADER approach was 360 million euros in the period 2014–2020. An important aspect of LEADER financing in Finland is that voluntary in-kind contributions are accepted as match funding in community-based projects. The total value of in-kind contributions was calculated as 55 M€ based on 2.6 million hours of unpaid manual or machine work for community projects (Leader-Suomi, 2022).

5 Project Activities in the Villages

There are up to 4000 rural settlements in Finland which could be regarded as villages (Suomen Kylät, 2021). The latest nationwide survey on villages “The state of village action 2010” (Hyyryläinen et al., 2011) was addressed to 3723 recipients representing village committees, associations or other collective bodies acting in rural areas. 1086 (29%) of these local bodies replied and 48% had had experiences of project funding for collective local development actions in the past five years. The most common source of project funding was the LAG acting in the area. Typical local projects involved, for example, organizing common events or developing the living environment.

In the survey, widespread dissatisfaction was observed, for example, in relation to the organization of the projects. A clearly larger proportion of the respondents had more negative than positive experiences with project activities. Almost a third (31%) of the respondents only mentioned negative aspects of project activities, while just one in seven (15%) respondents only brought up good aspects. 40% of respondents mentioned both good and bad features. The remaining 15% did not make either positive or negative comments, but, for example, presented suggestions for improvement or general, neutral comments about the project activities. In total, more than 70% of rural actors saw weaknesses or problems in the project mode of local development.

The criticism was particularly focused on the workload involved in project administration and the inflexibility. Another problem was that too much responsibility was laid on the shoulders of a small group of active participants. Implementation problems, such as raising the required match funding and delays in project payments were also among the typical difficulties experienced by village actors. Most villages had received less than 50,000 euros for local development projects over the past five years. It can therefore be assumed that the majority of local projects were dependent on voluntary action, with very few paid staff such as project managers (Hyyryläinen et al., 2011).

6 Research Setting, Data and Method

The findings of the village action survey sparked us to undertake further investigation to understand what is happening at the crossroads between the locally justified place-based development agenda (“the why, what, how”) and the agenda put forward by the

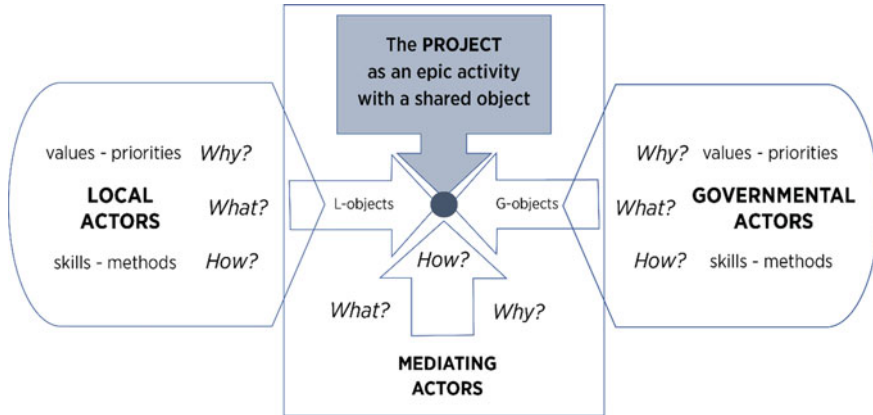


Fig. 1 Dispositions around a project process

government. Based on earlier research literature on rural, project and organization studies, we identified the multi-levelled project process as an epic activity that weaves together actors, aspirations and related discourses from several different directions. We also want to look into mediation as an activity at the crossroads and try to shed light on mediating acts and processes. (Fig. 1).

In this study we tackle two research questions:

1. *What is behind the criticisms levelled by local actors against local development projects, despite the generous rewards available for place-based development?*
2. *How are the LAGs positioned in the projectified rural development scene?*

In this research, we drew on two sets of empirical data. The first data source was the “State of village action 2010” survey referred to earlier. This is still the most recent overall outlook on village action in Finland. We believe that the big picture it provides is still valid for the purposes of this study.

Among other things, the survey collected the opinions of local actors regarding their experiences of rural development project activities. The respondents were asked to comment, in their own words, on the positive and negative sides of their project action. 562 open answers of varied length were received back. With this depository of open accounts, we were able to conduct a qualitative content analysis for the purposes of this study.

The second data source was a set of ten thematic interviews with LAG managers and state officials from the ELY centres, who act as contact persons for the LAGs in their region. There were nine individual interviews and one three-person focus group interview. The purpose of the interviews was to obtain additional viewpoints and to “make sense” of the rather negative outlook on projects and project processes revealed in the initial data.

7 Method

The analysis was threefold. First, the open answers from the village action survey were classified according to the reasons put forward by the respondents for their dissatisfaction and the problems they encountered (project experiences) and rearranged in five categories. Each excerpt was linked with the stage of the narrative schema where it seemed to resonate best. For example, when the informant complained that: “Nobody wants to finance the activities that are needed in the villages..”, we considered that this comment resonated most with the manipulation stage of the narrative schema where the “have to do’s” (or not) come into play.

Second, the interviews with the LAG managers and state governmental officials were transcribed verbatim. The interviewees were asked to reflect on the reasons put forward by the local actors for their dissatisfaction and the problems they encountered. The interviews were then analyzed as texts under the five categories reflecting the narrative schema.

Third, when the two datasets are taken together, the guiding idea behind the analysis of the accounts (texts) is the narrative interpretation. This means that, apart from using the phases of the narrative schema to structure and classify the texts, we also look for narrative features in the excerpts, reflect on agencies and try to understand the texts as an epic process that organizes project-based rural development. Quotations from the texts are used to illustrate the data and analysis.

8 Analysis and Results as Seen Through the Narrative Lenses

The field of project action can be thought of as several overlapping and embedded narrative schemas based on the goals and perspectives of different agents. The most important groups of agents in this analysis are:

- village actors implementing local rural development projects, i.e. the local actors,
- LAG managers,
- state government officials from the regional ELY centres, i.e. the governmental actors.

In addition, given that socio-semiotic theory also acknowledges the transformative power of the nonhuman (cf. Latour), documents such as the Rural Development Programme (RDP) for Mainland Finland should be considered. With this in mind, we started by sketching a simplified narrative schema of the RDP for Mainland Finland, which forms the framework for the EU’s programme-based rural development in Finland and is undeniably a major rural development narrative in Finland (Table 2).

Illustrating the RDP discourse as the initial situation does not mean that everything in real life starts there. Recognizing the general fractal nature of narrative schemas means that there are yet other schemas to which RDP for Finland belongs.

Table 2 Simplified narrative schema of the rural development programme (RDP) for Mainland Finland (2014–2020)

Phase of the schema	Description/Modality
Initial situation	Deficit: Rural areas are “lagging behind” (GDP, jobs, access to services, welfare, etc.)
Manipulation/commitment	“Have to do”: RDP persuades potential actors to improve their livelihood and living conditions by means of projects
Competence	“Can do”: Existing institutions, like ELY centres, LAGs, village committees, development organizations, educational institutions, etc.; information channels; financial resources
Performance	“Do”: Actors implement projects; the RDP releases funds to eligible projects
Sanction	“Recognition of performance”: Feedback, evaluations; acknowledgement of the performance by the Programme Monitoring Committee (continuation of EU funding)

In administrative sciences, multi-levelled governance is the term given to subsume the embeddedness of national and regional programmes in the major context of the European Union. This analysis does not challenge that. Taking the RDP as the starting point is a pragmatic choice which is suitable for the purposes of this analysis.

The next stage is to walk through the phases of the narrative schema, keeping the focus on the problematics of the organization of local development projects.

8.1 Instances of Initial Tension and Manipulation

The narrative schema begins with the initial situation. The local actors taking part in the national survey were representatives of village associations and other collective bodies at the local level. The potential tension with regard to the initial situation of the project activity relates to the different perceptions among local actors regarding development goals and how to achieve them.

Not surprisingly, the goals of local project activities sometimes come into conflict with the goals set by the authorities. One local actor offered the following account:

Nobody wants to finance the activities that are needed/wanted in the villages. Funds would certainly be available for other projects/“projects” that others think are more important – Big projects are crazy in terms of goals and measures due to the funder’s excessive requirements. The project work is no longer interesting, exciting or inspiring with the current hassle [village actor, North Ostrobothnia area].

The village actor—the recipient of the general order from the RDP to come up with projects—asserts her frustration. She feels that other people’s projects are being imposed upon her. From the perspective of the village, big projects seem crazy and their goals and measures of success do not make sense. The village actor reached the

conclusion that she should opt out of the suggested rural development instrument, the project. In other words, the directive set in motion in the manipulation phase was not carried out and instead was rejected.

It is obvious that the recipient can reject the directive (her decision to opt out highlights a less discussed development in the literature on narrative schema). With regard to the prototypic narrative scheme, the project episode is downsized before it is carried out.

In the additional inquiry, the governmental actors and the LAG managers interviewed for the study, did not initially agree with the claims that there was tension between the goals set by the RDP and those set by local actors. It would not fit the narrative of the RDP project cycle if the well-intentioned goals and the resources provided by the programme framework were rejected.

In further reflection, a governmental actor suggested that the village actors may not fully understand the big picture of the RDP, and that the regional or transregional projects financed by the governmental actors, which are larger in scale and run by professional project organizations, may have created an image of a project world that is completely different from the development activities run by the villages. In other words, the problem, if there is one, lies with village actor misunderstanding.

Some of the LAG managers also identified potential reasons for the negative opinion expressed by the local actor. They claimed for example that the contents of the initial proposals from the villages sometimes required rewording and alterations to meet the funding requirements set out in the RDP. In such situations, the people who come up with the initial development idea may get the impression that the project plan has little to do with their original intentions. Project ideas can also be subject to strategic guidance to make them compatible with the LAG strategy. The guidance issued by the LAG is intended to help local actors recognize new potential for development and innovation in their local areas. In this case, in the words of one LAG representative, it is important that the local actors continue to feel that the initiative remains in their hands. A delicate balance must be struck:

We have to be careful in that, if we want projects in line with our strategy to appear, we have to inspire people and push them in that direction. But then at the same time we must take care that there is no misunderstanding of the matter... that their goals would be wrong. [LAG manager, Lapland area].

Seen through the vocabulary of the narrative schema, what we have here is the embeddedness of the narrative schemas of different actors. For the RDP, the LAG is one of the key competences needed to successfully reach the overall goals of the programme. For an LAG executing its strategy within the RDP framework, it is important to meet its own strategic goals. If the LAG strives for innovation, as many do, it has to maintain the corresponding discourse and persuade the local actors to follow suit by means of discursive actions. In this way, the LAG carries out discursive manipulation. In the best scenario, the local actor accepts the directive and commits him/herself to the LAG strategy. The interviewee's recommendation: "We have to be careful here.." suggests that the best scenario for the LAG is that the local actor is unaware of the effects of the strategy on her/his project.

The key to avoiding fatal conflicts (that would stem the flow of projects) seems to be the sensitivity of the LAG towards the initiatives presented by local actors and its ability to coordinate the goals of local actors (the strategy) with the RDP goals. This will require careful attention to detail in the mediation between the two. If this fails, the meaningfulness of the project may begin to be eroded even before the planning phase is completed.

8.2 Instances of Commitment—Fear of Bureaucracy and Non-commitment

When an actor, in this case a local actor such as a village association, accepts the directive, she or he commits to carrying out the mission and wants to act to achieve it. Without the actor's "wanting to do" something, the project action cannot proceed. Commitment is therefore a critical stage in the successful RDP project cycle.

In our data from the village survey, various actors expressed concern about local people not getting involved, an issue which we will now go on to explore. We will begin with an excerpt from a village action representative.

Project management bureaucracy is a threat to local projects. It often kills creativity and enthusiasm. In addition, you have to worry that you won't get the money and if you do, you have to wait for years.. [Village actor, Southwest Finland area].

The actor asserts here that the required commitment is curbed by the project management bureaucracy. Presumably, the actor has also encountered funding cuts and major delays in earlier payments of the project grant. These are all likely to impact on his or her own future commitment. The actor also seems to think that this will make her/his peers less likely to get involved in similar project activities.

Although many villages reported that they had their own plans and ideas for local development, the application for RDP project resources was not considered as the only obvious option. The notion that the project would require a lot of time and energy was mentioned in several comments as a negative experience or a risk that might damage people's commitment to local project work. In addition, the job of managing the project is typically given to the most active members of the community, who are in danger of becoming exhausted from doing too many things.

Amidst all these complaints about bureaucracy and burdensome implementation, credit was given to the LAGs for offering project advice and disseminating information to the best of their knowledge. This suggests that the presence of a LAG is, indeed, a competence, which is also related to the next phase of the prototype narrative schema.

As regards the risks of a lack of commitment, both governmental actors and LAG managers identified a common enemy, overstretched bureaucracy. They all contended that the workload and bureaucratic requirements arising from EAFRD co-funded projects had reached an unreasonable level. It was considered completely disproportionate that the very small-scale projects typically proposed by village actors had

to comply with the same requirements as the large projects. This caused problems, especially in the payment phase when copies of receipts had to be provided together with the final report. Both groups of actors identified ways of simplifying project funding. Two of these, the improved electronic administration system and the lump sum procedure, were adopted in the 2014–2020 programme period.

Notwithstanding the notion of a common enemy in the form of bureaucracy, an LAG manager hinted that there was also an issue with the governmental actors:

It would be great if the “ELY folks” wanted to use their own judgment and would dare to use it. That you wouldn’t have to bow down to everything that comes from outside. (i.e. the higher levels of administration). [LAG manager, North Karelia area].

In this case, the tension seems to be about whether or not the governmental actors dare to use the discretion that they still have. The same speaker concludes that in the worst case the local LAG board had been intimidated by the ELY centre, and the ELY centre in turn by the central government authorities. In the end, “this whole chain has in a way become a bit like... it has turned a bit like a culture of intimidation” [ibid.].

Another risk to commitment in terms of the uptake of a local project as a form of development, is the availability of in-kind (voluntary work) contributions (*talkoot* in Finnish). In the eyes of the village actors, commitment to a local project is often also dependent on the availability of in-kind resources. This means the people in the villages—or people with ties to the villages—who are prepared to give up their time or other resources as in-kind contributions for a common good. While such in-kind goods (or lack thereof) are important aspects of commitment at the initial stage, the sufficient supply of voluntary work and other in-kind goods are also competences that form the substance of the next phase of the narrative schema.

Finally, commitment to local development is also dependent on the LAG’s philosophy and the way they act and operate in the area. There is less likely to be strong commitment if the LAG fails to inspire and mobilize local people and the development activities seem unattractive to them.

8.3 Examples of Competencies—Skills, Advice, Funding

When a local actor, such as a village association, accepts a directive to mount a local development project, it needs multiple competencies, i.e. the “Can do” aspects and modalities of the narrative that make up the third phase of the narrative schema. An actor who has committed her/himself to achieving a goal (in phase two) either mobilizes or acquires the information, skills and tools necessary to achieve the goal and lead and manage the project. From the point of view of village actors, such competences include, for example, in-kind or expert work, as mentioned earlier, own and external funding and, for example, advice sought from the LAGs or the authorities.

In the village action survey, several village actors mentioned the need for project leaders to be very good at project administration. At times, it was seen as problematic that village actors have good ideas with, in their opinion, appropriate goals, but cannot find a suitable project leader from among their number. It was reportedly difficult to get anyone to commit to being the volunteer project leader, who would have to do the work in addition to his or her regular job.

The acquisition of the competencies required to organize a meaningful project that may involve professional project management. Among the actors interviewed, there was some debate as to whether an external project manager was needed and whether this was a good investment:

Too large a part of the project's expenses goes on the project leader's salaries. Genuine voluntary work (*talkoo* in Finnish) therefore suffers" [Village actor, Pohjois-Savo area].

This actor juxtaposes the salaried project leader and the work provided free of charge by volunteers. In other words, the project leader comes at the expense of voluntary work. According to this argument, hiring a manager weakens local willingness to provide voluntary work, which, within the context of village action, is an important competence and resource in its own right.

In the interviews, the LAG managers recognized the challenge involved in balancing the two competencies of in-kind voluntary work and hired project expertise, arguing that there were many possible reasons behind it. It could indicate, for example, feelings of envy in the village towards the hired person, and perhaps the volunteers do not recognize the monetary value of their own work, or, understand the role of the project leader. The value of a salaried project leader is not recognized in the organization of voluntary activities, in maintaining the flame of development alive, in administration skills or in the use of networks. The problems can occur especially if the project leader is not well-known within the community or if she/he fails to activate volunteers. So as to avoid possible conflicts, the LAGs consider it essential that the local actors themselves get to choose the project manager and accept this person as part of the community and as another competence towards the village's development goals.

The two data sources also touched upon the competences ("the can do") of the LAGs. In the village action survey, LAGs were seen as both advisory organizations and a source of funding. The village actors appreciated the support of the LAGs, especially in terms of administrative expertise, describing them as the only body that assisted local actors. Interestingly, the local municipalities (who have certain responsibilities in welfare and economic development at the local level) were often viewed solely as fund-providers.

Although the survey contained a lot of critical comments about bureaucracy, only rarely was the criticism connected to the activities of the LAGs themselves. The few cases that came up were due to a perceived lack of expertise or outdated instructions.

In one of the interviews, a governmental actor made clear that the competence of LAG goes beyond its funding role, by stating the following:

I mentioned some Leader groups that act more as funders than as implementers of the development program. They just "passively" wait for the project application to come in and

then present to the LAG board whether or not to finance it. That would be the worst example in a way. In that case the purpose of the (RD) programming becomes blurred.. [Governmental actor, Häme Region].

Here, the governmental actor condemns the LAG for concentrating exclusively on funding. Implicitly at least, the speaker claims that LAGs should be more than grant providers, which, in reality, is the job of the governmental actor. In the speaker's opinion, the unidimensional role of the LAG (i.e. purely as a provider of funds) blurs the idea of LEADER.

As regards the competence of funding, the requirement for the villages to put up a matching amount of funds for the village development projects was a problem for many villages. In-kind contributions are of great importance, but are not sufficient to cover all the required match funding. In some cases, the lack of self-financing (in-kind or cash) prevented local projects from getting off the ground. According to the LAG managers and governmental actors, arranging temporary funding (to cover costs until the grant is paid out) was one of the biggest challenges along with the burden of bureaucracy. However, more and more local actors get interest-free loans from the local councils to help solve the temporary funding issue.

8.4 Performance

Within the narrative frame, the fourth phase is performance, where the tension that appeared in the initial situation and was acted on in the manipulation phase is finally resolved. The village actor or agent performs the actions needed to achieve the goal with the help of the available or acquired competencies discussed in the earlier phases.

In practice, performance is a crucial phase of the project in that this is where the local actors' experiences of programme-based development take place. Good or bad project experiences are reflected in their accumulated stock of experiences and in the opinions of the local actors. Here, it would seem that they are best discussed in other phases of the narrative schema.

Experiences of project funding are generally quite well-known because they have been collected in many previous evaluations. These have often shown similar kinds of problematics (excessive paper work, etc.). The wealth of accumulated project experience explains why some actors are willing (or unwilling) to contribute to projects.

8.5 Examples of Sanction—The Question of Achievement and Meaningfulness

The final stage of the narrative schema is called sanction, the stage when actions are evaluated and performance recognized. Taken as a whole, the village action survey

revealed more negative comments about the projects than positive ones. The negative opinions were associated, in particular, with the bureaucratic rules and procedures related to the projects together with the challenges faced in raising the matching funds.

The benefits of the project activities were seen, for example, in terms of positive publicity or recognition in the local press or by public authorities, as in the following excerpt:

Our project focused on supporting elderly people living at home. The project had a beneficial effect on improving the conditions of the elderly, and a similar positive improvement was also noted in the health centre and home nursing care. (– –) [Village actor, Lapland area].

All in all, however, there were few comments in the survey about the final results of the projects the actors had implemented.

Some village actors felt that the projects had negative consequences. A few said that some projects had even sparked social conflicts in the villages. At their worst, projects were described as having divided the village community:

In our village, the word “project” has a negative meaning! The projects of the early 2000’s “divided” our village. And we are still suffering from them! [Village actor, Kainuu area].

There are many possible reasons—person-related, interpersonal and so on—for the dramatic experience of this village. On a more general level, the LAG managers and governmental actors brought up the question of project fatigue as a quite frequent event that could also explain the limited recognition of projects as a mode of development. To undertake a project-based process of collective development involves a lot of work in every regard. After such great effort and work, no matter how good the result may be, the community needs to take a rest before embarking on new initiatives. One of the LAG managers, however, considered it alarming that the fatigue was in her opinion no longer related to the workload of the project as such (e.g. in-kind construction work by local volunteers), and instead was due to the burden of the administrative work involved.

One LAG manager talked about failed projects as “project corpses” that remain alive in people’s memories a long time after the project actually fails. The speaker wants to protect the LAG from the negative opinions arising from such events.

(– –) The most important task of us Leader actors and funders is to try to ensure that there are no project corpses. They are the worst, the most negative advertising.” [LAG manager, Häme region].

The same speaker ends by concluding, however, that taking risks is also an inevitable part of the project process: “But sometimes it happens when there is like a wrong person or the person has received incorrect instructions or there are conflicts within the community due to confusing command relationships. Or if people in the LAG are stupid and demand extra papers that are not necessary or focus on the length of the final report or other such ridiculous things. (– –) We have been talking about project corpses and burying them so deep that they don’t smell. But sometimes they still happen. This is risk financing and there will always be some cases that are not successful. (– –)” [ibid.]

So the LAG manager suggests that while it is important for the LAG to avoid acquiring a negative reputation, for myriad reasons things do sometimes go wrong. As a result, there will be project corpses, but this is only to be expected because LEADER action is also about risk taking and risk funding.

To avoid risks coming true, both the governmental actor and the LAG manager argued that it was vital for the project to be well-planned and for the local actors to have a common understanding of project goals. They all contended that a good project starts from local needs and visions—even though they may be difficult to achieve within the project framework.

9 Conclusions

The starting point for this article was the finding from the national village survey that about half the local village actors in Finland perceived the programme-based rural development projects as negative experiences in some way or another.

We found that the typical criticisms levelled by local actors against rural development projects were related to excessive bureaucracy, cumbersome rules and overburdened volunteers. Such findings are by no means new or surprising and indeed are often found in evaluations and studies of RDPs (e.g. Rannanpää et al., 2020).

What then are the reasons for such feelings? We argue that there is a fundamental structural tension between local and governmental actors which comes to the surface in local development projects. As regards this structural tension, we can safely say that the governmental actors' conception of a project is *normative* and reflects the prevailing macrodiscourse on projects. In the villages, by contrast, there is a desire to act to solve local problems. In their minds, people construct an image of a goal-oriented process, the end result of which is a better state of affairs.

The perceived integrity of experiential local development activity is undermined when it encounters the normative, regulated project process. In the normative process, the desired course of action envisaged by the local actors is fragmented into parts that are difficult for non-project professionals to view as a meaningful entity. When taking on the funding of a local initiative, the administrative “machine” not only breaks down the local project into various parts, but also removes much of its uniqueness. What is a unique project for local actors becomes little more than raw material for the RDP machine. This structural contradiction gives rise to repeated negative experiences among the local actors in their communities.

Within the framework of the narrative interpretation, we can say that the local actors do not just blithely accept the directives given by the RDP. On the contrary, judging from their criticisms, its directives can and will be rejected more and more frequently if bad experiences continue to occur. The non-acceptance by local actors of the RDP project tasks and resources is understandably a serious risk to the implementation of the LEADER approach and of the Rural Development Programme as a whole. This structural tension cannot be completely eliminated, but it can be

alleviated. To this end, the normative requirements that projects as a form of development must comply with can and must be made simpler. In fact, some changes that make the life of local actors easier have already been implemented in the 2014–2020 programming period under EAFRD (e.g. lump sum budgeting).

The underlying structural tension makes the role played by mediating actors like the LAGs even more necessary. We can see from the data (and other research on the LEADER approach in Finland) that the mediating functions of LAGs are essential in smoothening the relationship between two quite separate worlds: the normative framework and the real-life experience of the local actors.

From a socio-semantic perspective, the strategies of the LAGs are also actors that set out the needs in their area and propose directives which the local actors are expected to adopt and commit to. The LAGs and their strategies serve as the glue that enables the European rural development system to stay together.

10 Discussion

The driving idea behind this book, as we see it, is to document experiences and share lessons on rural development policies and approaches across Europe. As our contribution, based on the analysis of local project experiences and tensions in Finland, we suggest the following:

- The point of view of local actors is critically important, i.e. how local actors experience project-based development. Without the commitment of local people, rural development programmes will not achieve their goals.
- Small rural development projects are often operated on a voluntary basis by amateur actors. The main motivation of these operators is not the financial benefit obtained through the projects, but the meaning and results they provide. Special attention must therefore be paid to motivating and involving these non-professional actors. They have critical know-how and social capital without which local development projects cannot succeed.
- Actors and mechanisms for mediating between the government administration and the local actors (especially the volunteers) are essential. This is the main role of the LAGs within the RDP framework. Above all, LAGs are intermediary organizations and platforms who are central to the successful implementation of local projects under the strategy they devise.
- LAGs must strive to maintain their own special identity and their position between the local actors and the government administration, so as to avoid gradually blending into and becoming part of the administration, an administrative machine that no longer recognizes the way local actors perceive meaningful action for their communities.
- In the case of Finland, it is important to highlight that local government decision-makers in municipalities appreciate the importance of the LEADER approach. They recognize the enabling role of the LAGs in encouraging local residents to

get involved in voluntary activities, and in making best use of local competences and resources to boost the overall vitality of their areas.

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Can Successful Promotion of Tourism Prevent Rural Depopulation? A Case Study of Soportújar (Spain)



Juan Carlos Maroto-Martos , Aida Pinos-Navarrete ,
and Noelia Ruiz-Moya 

Abstract In this study of a remote mountain village in southern Spain, which is at risk of depopulation, we analyze the origin, development and current situation of a tourism project which has been a huge success with visitors. The project is based on a cultural resource associated with local identity: “Soportújar - the Witch Village”. We aim to answer the following questions: Who launched this scheme? What was it based on? How did they do it? What problems have they encountered along the way and continue to face today? What does the mayor think of the process and of the current situation? Has the project inverted the declining demographic trend that the village has been suffering since the middle of the twentieth century? To answer these questions, we used data from official quantitative sources which were contrasted with in-depth interviews with the mayor of the village and some of the local residents, and with news released by the Council and other bodies. We conclude that the official demographic data, which suggest that the population dynamic in Soportújar has not improved, do not reflect the real situation in the village. We set out the reasons why we believe that the official figures do not accurately portray the economic and above all demographic revitalization that the village is currently enjoying. We defend the importance of micro-spatial case studies to further our knowledge in the fight against rural depopulation.

Keywords Rural depopulation · Cultural tourism · Witchcraft · Alpujarra · Spain

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1 Introduction

The main theme of this study is the demographic challenge that must be tackled to ensure balanced and sustainable territorial development in Europe. In this case, the spatial scope of the study is a small municipality, Soportújar, in Andalusia, a peripheral region of Spain in south-west Europe. Within Andalusia, Soportújar belongs to the Alpujarra, an internationally renowned *comarca* (sub-region) on the southern side of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in the province of Granada (Fig. 1).

It would be hard to argue that this case study is representative of the vast diversity of rural Europe. However, the village's current situation, the result of the particular impact that the processes of economic globalization have had on this area over the course of time, allows us to argue that Soportújar shares many of the problems and risks faced by mountain villages across Mediterranean Europe: economic lethargy, emigration, ageing, masculinization, depopulation, etc.

The serious situation faced by the population of many European rural areas means that it is becoming increasingly urgent to act, not only to try to improve their quality of life and opportunities, but also due to the objective need to prevent these economic, social and environmental problems from getting worse, something that would surely happen if settlements like this one, which in the case of Andalusia and of Spain in

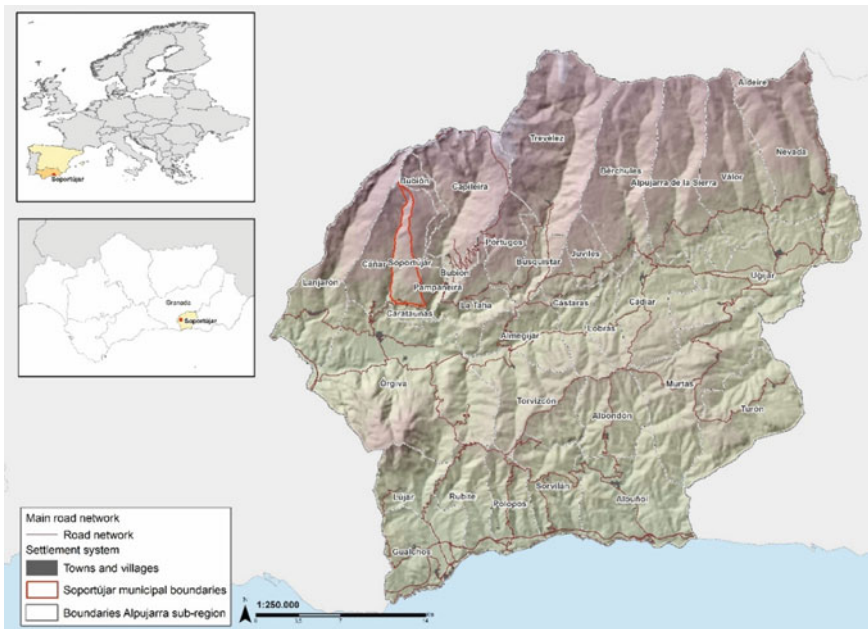


Fig. 1 Location of the municipality of Soportújar. *Source* Andalusia Statistics and Cartography Institute. Created by the authors

general have been inhabited uninterruptedly for many hundreds of years, were to disappear.

With this in mind, we base our study on the initial hypothesis that the development strategies that they are trying to implement in these areas today require more case studies at a micro-spatial scale, which enable direct contact with the territories and above all with people who have first-hand knowledge of the problems they are facing and are trying to find solutions to them.

Case studies at this scale are an excellent laboratory for testing not only the validity of neo-endogenous local development theories, but also the most suitable methods for implementing them. Furthermore, they enable us to reflect on the reliability of the information sources on which the diagnoses of rural problems are based. They also offer a more precise vision of the role played by the different public administrations, entities and collectives that participate in the design, funding and implementation of development strategies; finally, they offer us a deeper insight into the individuals (and their particular characteristics) that lead the projects which seek to breathe new life into some of the most marginal areas of rural Europe.

In this particular case, we conducted an in-depth analysis of a successful tourism project aimed at revitalizing the municipality of Soportújar. The project was based on a cultural resource of an anthropological nature, which formed part of the village identity: witches and witchcraft.

We will try to find answers to the following questions: Why did this rural tourism product, which has been very successful in terms of visitors, appear in a mountain village in a peripheral region of Europe which has been suffering depopulation, ageing and the abandonment of its economic mainstay, agriculture, since the middle of the twentieth century? Who promoted it? What did they base themselves on? How did they do it? What problems have they faced and continue to face today? What does the mayor think about the process and about the current situation? Has it reverted the declining population trend in Soportújar?

2 Theoretical Framework and Current State of the Question

One of the main issues facing Europe today and quite probably in the future is the loss of demographic weight at an international scale and the imbalanced territorial distribution of its population (Eurostat, 2022a, 2022b). This is due to a combination of three common trends, namely low fertility, especially in southern European countries (Pison, 2021), rural depopulation (Dolton-Thornton, 2021) and generalized ageing (Lutz et al., 2018), with important economic, social and environmental implications in the present and more than likely in the future (Coleman & Rowthorn, 2011; ESPON, 2017).

Depopulation, defined as a “demographic and territorial phenomenon that involves a fall in the number of inhabitants of a particular territory or population centre

compared to a previous period” (Pinilla & Sáez, 2017), is impacting above all on rural Europe and is characterized by its complexity, with differing onset, duration and intensity in different places. Its causes lie above all in economic factors and it has consequences for both the present and the future (Collantes & Pinilla, 2020).

Although rural depopulation has been the subject of academic research for some time now, and in particular since the first half of the first decade of the twenty-first century, a solid field of research has yet to establish itself at a European scale a (Rodríguez-Soler et al., 2020). The same is true at institutional level, as evidenced by the fact that in recent years it has again become a subject of interest for the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee (ESPON, 2020). This also happened in Spain, albeit slightly later (Pinilla & Sáez, 2021).

It is generally accepted that rural depopulation often results from farming becoming less and less able to satisfy the needs and expectations of the rural population in large parts of the world (Camarero et al., 2020). The deagrarianization of large swathes of rural Europe has created a vicious circle driven historically by a range of economic, social, political, technical factors, etc., which interact and exacerbate each other, influenced by the progressive implementation and intensification of economic globalization (Dunaway, 1996).

The result was that their inhabitants, especially those in remote and/or mountainous areas, became increasingly aware at a generalized level of the expanding gap in salaries and working conditions between farming and other occupations. They also noticed the great inequalities compared with city dwellers in terms of public services and infrastructure, gradually assimilating the idea that: “village = negative place and city = positive place”.

This process has been studied in the Alpujarra, one of the mountain regions of Andalusia and indeed of Spain that was most affected by the mass emigration that took place after the end of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and was particularly intensive between the 1940s and 1970s (Araque Jiménez, 2009; García Martínez, 1999; Mignon, 1982; Rodríguez Martínez, 1983).

The lack of investment, together with the harsh local conditions, the widespread *minifundismo* (very small inefficient farms), the widely scattered fields, etc., made the mechanization of farm work very difficult, so preventing an increase in output or productivity, in spite of the great efforts made in this direction by the population, as can still be seen today in the landscape.

The municipalities that most suffered the effects of emigration were those with the smallest populations. The chosen destinations were normally passed on “by word of mouth” by relatives, friends and acquaintances and as a result were places where those who took this bold step would receive help and solidarity. The destinations were normally in places where the Spanish government was investing most and/or the most dynamic parts of the country; in short where there was most demand for workers. In the case of the Alpujarra, the people emigrated to the “enarenados” (new, highly productive agricultural areas) of the East Coast and the south coast of Almería, as well as to Catalonia, the Basque Country, Valencia and Madrid. Large numbers also went further afield to France and Germany.

Between 1950 and the year 2000, the population of the Alpujarra fell by almost half. Since 2001, this tendency has changed slightly. Population levels have recovered slightly to reach a situation of relative stability in the last decade. This is essentially due to substantial increases in a small number of municipalities, which tend to mask the very widespread depopulation suffered by the vast majority of them.

The varied problems of rural areas at European, Spanish, Andalusia and Alpujarra level have been widely analyzed and diagnosed and attempts have been made to solve them through a multitude of reports, agreements and measures. In the case of Spain, after joining the European Union, the LEADER initiative has perhaps had the greatest influence in this direction.

The search for solutions to try to promote rural development, in particular by fomenting rural tourism, received a key boost from the implementation of the LEADER initiative in 1991. The first programme, Leader I, pushed above all for promoting hitherto unexploited endogenous rural resources, both natural and cultural, which would be consumed through rural tourism, above all by city dwellers who were looking for experiences in healthier, less densely populated areas.

Spain's entry into the European Union, and the possibilities that this created in terms of funds to be invested in rural areas, aroused growing interest (from rural studies researchers among others) in the potential of rural tourism. As well as exploring the theoretical and methodological dimensions of this tourist segment in greater depth, they also made great efforts to characterize the supply and demand to discover the main problems or obstacles to its introduction. Some even assessed some of the most important possible strategies put forward to encourage the development of marginal poor rural municipalities (Alvarado Corrales, 2006; Cànoves & Pérez, 2000; Cànoves Valiente et al., 2005; Cejudo García et al., 2021; Hortelano Mínguez, 2001; Jurado Almonte & Pazos García, 2016; Maroto & Pinos, 2019; Morales Hernández & Fernández Hernández, 2019; Nieto Masot & Cárdenas Alonso, 2015; Sánchez Sánchez & Sánchez Sánchez, 2018; Soler Vayà & San Martín González, 2022, 2023; Yubero & García Hernández, 2019; etc.).

However, "after more than 30 years of investment in rural tourism co-funded by the EU, there have been few studies that have evaluated the effects and to a lesser extent the impact of this sector on demographic trends at local level" (Soler Vayà & San Martín González, 2022, p. 132). Those that have agreed that the introduction of rural tourism by itself has not managed to prevent the fact that in most rural areas, Andalusia included, population continues to decline. At best, rural tourism has helped stabilize the population over time (Maroto & Pinos, 2019).

The above is the norm, in spite of the fact that in some areas rural tourism plays an important role in the local economy (Jurado Almonte & Pazos García, 2016). A wide array of formulas have been used to promote it. These include agritourism, of which there is a long tradition in Europe and in Spain as a complement to a declining agricultural sector (Hernández Mogollón et al., 2011; Streifeneder & Dax, 2020). In other areas, attempts have been made to develop experiential tourism in relation to specific local agricultural products such as wine or olive oil (Baraja Rodríguez et al., 2019; Cuesta Aguilar & Moya García, 2019; López-Gurmán & Sánchez Cañizares, 2008).

There are a few cases of success such as in Alto Aragón, in northern Spain, where “the breaking of the isolation and the drive toward new ways of life associated with nature and mountain tourism managed to bring people back to areas that were practically empty” (Marín Gavín, 2015).

We have general responses at both a national and regional scale (Jurado Almonte & Pazos García, 2016), and there are even studies that discovered a positive correlation between the total nights spent in rural accommodation and the participation in rural development programmes under the LEADER approach (Soler Vayà & San Martín González, 2023). However, there have been few detailed studies that offer insights into the demographic effects of the application of innovative projects in municipalities at risk of depopulation.

3 Materials and Methods

As indicated earlier, this case study focuses on a deep rural municipality in an area known as the Alpujarra on the south side of the Sierra Nevada mountain range (Fig. 2).

Our first task was to confirm that Soportújar is a municipality that has suffered severe depopulation since the middle of the twentieth century. To this end, we consulted various official statistical sources, censuses of population and municipal

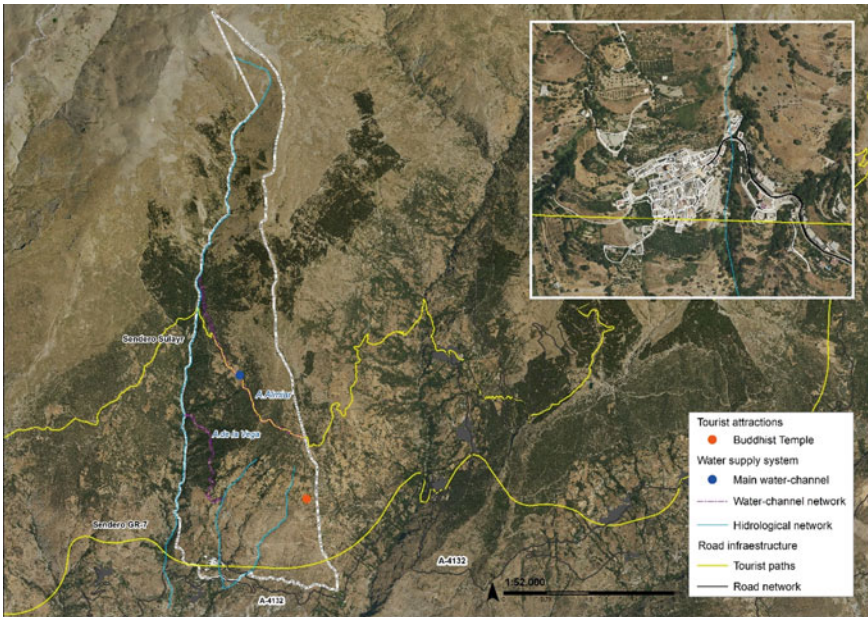


Fig. 2 Location of the village of Soportújar and other resources of interest within its municipal boundaries. *Source* National Geographic Institute. The authors

censuses of inhabitants. The figures we obtained were checked in a conversation with the current mayor of the municipality, focusing especially on the information for the period immediately prior to the launch of the tourism project and the period immediately afterwards. This enabled us to identify certain questions of interest to allow us to carry out a proper analysis and diagnosis. The available data at a local scale were statistically processed to calculate various demographic indicators that shed light on questions relating to both the evolution of the population and its current characteristics.

After finding out about the current situation and dynamics of the village's main resource, its population, the next stage was to characterize what has traditionally been, until very recently, the village's main economic activity, its agricultural sector. For this purpose, we consulted current and historical sources on farms and smallholdings (Agrarian Censuses from 1962 and 2020), their crops and uses (Department of Agriculture, Livestock-farming, Fishing and Sustainable Development of the Regional Government of Andalucía). We also explored other factors such as the steep slopes within the municipal area (Department of the Environment and Territorial Planning), which limited not only agricultural activity but also mechanization, accessibility, etc. All of the above are key factors that must be analyzed to understand the high level of emigration from the village.

In order to discover the reasons behind the appearance, evolution and current situation of the successful tourism offer, we conducted an in-depth interview with the current mayor of Soportújar, in addition to consulting other sources such as the municipal website and the opinions of residents.

4 Results

4.1 *Population of Soportújar in the Twentieth Century*

Soportújar's main resource, its population, reached its maximum level in 1950 with 832 inhabitants, after which it plummeted down to less than 300 in 1981. Since then, the trend has been towards relative stabilization with much less intense losses, with the result that in the last 70 years, the population of the village has fallen to less than a third (259 people in 2021) of what it was in the mid-twentieth century (Fig. 3).

The population of Soportújar has fallen more sharply than in the Alpujarra as a whole, even despite the fact that, within the province of Granada, the Alpujarra was the sub-region most affected by emigration and had one of the highest rates of abandonment in Andalusia and in Spain as a whole.

Together with the fall in population, the village has also suffered a change in its demographic structure according to age and sex. In 1950 it went from a male/female ratio of 99.0 men for every 100 women to the current situation of 107.2 men for every 100 women; this shows that Soportújar has undergone a process of masculinization, a quite generalized phenomenon in the rural areas of Andalusia and Spain.

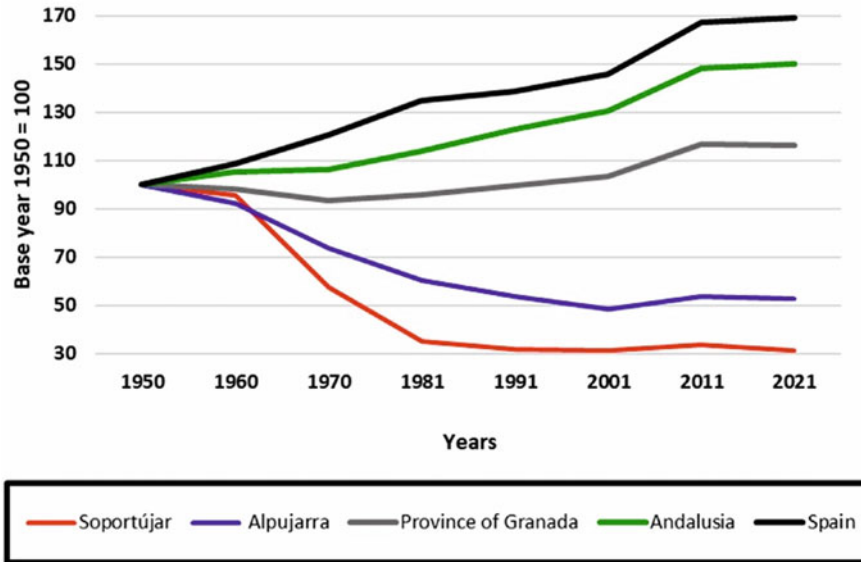


Fig. 3 Population of Soportújar 1950–2021 (Base year 1950 = 100). Source Census of Population. The authors

This phenomenon has coincided with no less serious processes of demographic ageing, a birth rate of almost zero and an important decline in the number of women of childbearing age. This can be seen in the population pyramids for Soportújar for 2021 (Fig. 4).

According to the mayor and various local residents, this huge outflow of people left the village above all for Barcelona, Bilbao, France and Germany. The reasons they put forward for leaving the village were essentially related to the lack of opportunities in the area in comparison with other parts of Spain and abroad.

Some of the root causes are easily identified in an analysis of the available official sources. These include *minifundismo*, as manifested in highly fragmented land ownership and small farm size, and the enormous obstacles created by the steep-sloping terrain for mechanization or for establishing transport connections with other more dynamic areas. In 1962, there were 120 smallholdings in the municipality that occupied 1,634 Ha. The vast majority (87.5%) was very small (less than 5 Ha), and almost all were rainfed (94.1%). In the small amount of irrigated land, the dominant crop was wheat (42.7%). The prevalent form of agriculture was therefore one in which farmers grew crops for their own consumption, using virtually no machinery and with very low yields. This made it difficult to meet the needs of the whole family, even though many had various small fields used for different purposes, making the most of a terrain with huge differences in altitude.

At present according to the Agrarian Census of 2020, there are just nine farms in the municipality, covering a useful agrarian area of 133 Ha. These are used above all

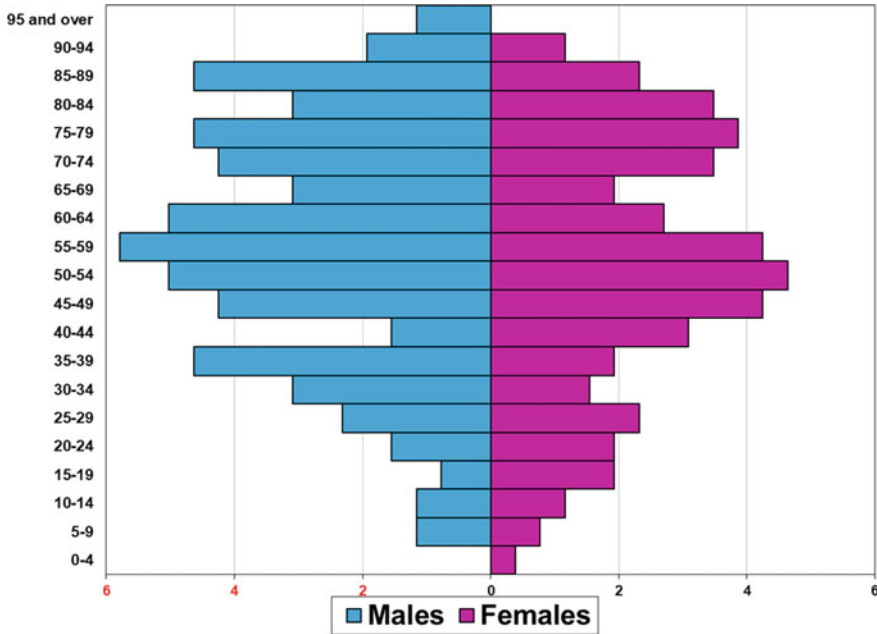


Fig. 4 Population pyramids for Soportújar in 2021. *Source* Drawn up by the authors on the basis of data from the Municipal Census of Inhabitants

as permanent grazing. Just 0.05 Ha is devoted to arable land. According to the Department of Agriculture, Livestock-Farming, Fishing and Sustainable Development of the Regional Government of Andalucía, in 2020 there were 16 Ha of herbaceous crops of which forage corn was the most common, while there were 33 Ha of woody crops, of which the main irrigated crop was olive trees, while the rainfed fields were dominated by almonds.

These data confirmed what the mayor had told us about farming in the village: “Nobody in the municipality works in agriculture these days, there are just a few family vegetable gardens where people grow things for their own consumption”. One can therefore conclude that what had previously been the most important economic activity in the municipality has now all but disappeared.

With the slump in agriculture, shepherding and forestry, it was vital to create new business activities that would take their place as drivers of the local economy. It was urgent to prevent the few young people left in the village from leaving, so reducing the dependence of the local economy on subsidies and the pensions of the retired people who lived there. Hopes centred on rural tourism.

4.2 *Initial Idea, Development and Current Situation of the “Proyecto Embrujo” (Bewitchery Project)*

Until just five years ago, Soportújar was completely unknown in Spain or even in the Andalusia region. Today, however it has managed to attract visitors to the province from all over Spain and abroad.

This change has been brought about by the setting up of a cultural project which aimed to attract tourism based on the village’s anthropological roots: the historic tradition by which the people from the village were known as “*brujos y brujas*” (wizards and witches) by the people from neighbouring towns and villages. Indeed, the people of the Alpujarra traditionally referred to the female population of Soportújar as “*brujas*” or witches. Various explanations have been put forward for this, but the most generalized among the population of the village and perhaps the most plausible according to available mediaeval history studies, is that which claims that the settlers who colonized this area after the expulsion of the *moriscos* included families from Galicia who brought Celtic traditions with them, including stories about “*meigas*”, “*bruxas*”, healers and clairvoyants.

This name, witches, which could perhaps be interpreted as derogatory, was originally floated as an idea for an original tourism campaign by the man who was deputy-mayor between 1999 and 2007 and later mayor from 2007 to 2017.¹ His initial idea enjoyed the close collaboration and later promotion and leadership from the current mayor. Both men were university graduates.

Although in our in-depth interview with the current mayor, he told us that there had been attempts to promote Soportújar as a “place of witches” from as early as 1997, it was not until 2009 that important steps were taken. This was due to a lack of economic resources and even of support not only from part of the local population, but also initially from other administrations such as the Provincial Council of Granada, which, according to the mayor, would paradoxically later become the institution providing most support for the project.

The main reason offered by the current mayor as to what led them to try to find the necessary resources to implement this project was their desire to improve the quality of life of local people, most of whom lived on low incomes from unproductive agriculture which were complemented with subsidies, farmworkers benefit payments and seasonal work in other areas. From the beginning, they were also very clear that they wanted to promote a new business activity which would enable them to be less dependent on subsidies and to create new opportunities for the future of the village, as they were well aware that its population was waning.

The basic initial idea of the tourism project, which received full backing from the Town Council, was for Soportújar to become known as a “place of witches”. The

¹ Mr. José Antonio Martín Núñez is a graduate in Mathematics, Economics, Market Research and Techniques and in Business Management and Administration from the University of Granada, and Doctor in Algebraic Topography. He was deputy-mayor between 1999–2007 and mayor between 2007–2017. He enjoyed the support of the current mayor, Manuel Moreno Funes, who has continued his work.

women of the village became actively involved and in November 2008 they began gathering all the available information; mostly oral, from their elderly relatives. In this sense, the village's Adult Education School played a very important role. This methodology has been applied in other research into rural areas (Maroto Martos et al., 2019).

Over the course of time, the project, which we could refer to generically as “*Embrujo*” (bewitchery), has had various other similar names used for the various sub-projects that were created to apply for finance from various calls for funding at different levels: “*embrujas*”, “*embruja2*”, “*embrújate*” and “*embru-jarte*”. However, according to the current mayor, “*Really, they were all part of one single long-running project*”.

The initial strategy followed by the representatives of Soportújar Town Council was to devote a small proportion of the very limited funds that they obtained each year for running the village to support the promotion of the Embrujo project in the media. In those early years, social networks were still in their infancy, and the Town Council set itself the target of publicizing Soportújar as the witchcraft village in the press, radio and TV.

The project began to receive much firmer support from the Provincial Council of Granada, through provincial plans for cooperation in municipal building works and services (PPOYS), leading to the creation of the first infrastructures. These funds were increased substantially in 2013, in which the project received funds from the European LEADER programme which enabled the purchase of the first themed figures. These were not the first LEADER interventions in the village. During the first phase of the LEADER project (LEADER I 1991–1993), a long time before the Embrujo project was first proposed, an investment of 42,775 euros (of which the grant provided almost 13,000 euros) was made in the extension and improvement of tourist accommodation facilities. In Leader II (1994–1999), although large amounts (over 4 million euros) were invested in rural tourism in the Alpujarra, no projects aimed specifically at Soportújar were created and so no investments were made. The same happened with Leader + and PRODER II (2000–2006), in spite of the fact that the Alpujarra as a whole was one of the parts of the Province of Granada that most benefitted from these schemes. This is because investments were heavily concentrated in just a few municipalities (Órgiva, La Taha, Bérchules and Torvizcón). The Town Council did not receive another grant until the arrival of Leader A (2007–2013), for which they were awarded a grant of 154,299 euros. This enabled them to make a large total investment of 226,178 euros, so giving the project the firm backing it required.

More recently, Soportújar has also been a beneficiary of grants set out in the LEADER Local Development Strategies, within the framework of submeasure 19.2 of the LEADER Programme for the Rural Development of Andalusia (2014–2020). Specifically, the Town Council applied for a line of finance whose stated objective was “*the creation, improvement, and refitting in energy and environmental terms of infrastructure and facilities for public use in the municipalities in the sub-region that enhance the quality of life of local residents, such as proximity, social, cultural, sports and tourism services*”, which was to be managed by the Alpujarra Sierra

Nevada Rural Development Group. In this way, they received a grant of 45,776 euros, as part of a total investment of 80,000 euros, to be spent on preparing the village as a whole to promote tourism based on the Embruja2 project.

Finally, the tourism plan for the municipality (“Proyecto Embrujo de Soportújar”) was one of 28 selected in Spain as a beneficiary of 666,667 euros in grants from the Secretary of State for Tourism (SETUR) and an estimated total investment of 1,742,167 euros, from the Ordinary Programme of Plans for the Sustainability of Tourism in Destinations 2022 (Table 1). According to the Sub-Directorate General of Tourism Development and Sustainability (part of the Secretariat of State for Tourism of the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism of Spain), the Programme of Plans for the Sustainability of Tourism in Destinations was the main instrument used by the Spanish government to drive the transformation of the sector in collaboration with regional governments and local councils. The general objective is for Spain to maintain its position as a leading tourism country, accepting the challenge of ensuring that the key objectives of competitiveness, sustainability, quality and improving territorial balance are all mutually compatible. The Soportújar project, as a rural destination with tourist identity, therefore accepted the challenge of combating the decline in population, in this way, helping strengthen territorial cohesion. These investments have yet to be executed.

To take part in the selection process run by the Secretariat of State for Tourism, they presented a plan based, as mentioned earlier, on their cultural heritage, which had begun to materialize with the installation in the village of a series of sculptures and the preparation of other places to strengthen its anthropological identity as a place inhabited by witches. The objectives were: *“to improve the reception and attention provided to visitors, with high quality tourism services and infrastructures; ensure that Soportújar is officially declared as a Tourist Municipality; encourage*

Table 1 Some of the main tourist attractions created by the Embrujo Project

Witch-Eye Cave	Baba Yaga Witch House	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Soportújar</i> </p> <p style="text-align: center;">¡PUNTO DE INFORMACIÓN!</p> <p>Si has llegado hasta aquí y necesitas una pequeña ayuda para ubicarte...</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Abre tu cámara. 2. Enfoca el código y deja que la magia llegue a tu teléfono. <div style="text-align: center;"> </div> <p style="text-align: center;"><small>https://soportujaralpujarr.wixsite.com/mapavirtual</small></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Lugar de Embrujo</i> </p>
Haunted Bridge	Circle of the Covens	
Statue on the path to the O'Sel Ling Buddhist Centre	Magic Broomstick	
Fountain of the Witches	Wishing Well	
Snake Arcade	Magic Cauldrons	
Fountain of the Dragon	Dream-spinning Spider	
The Narrowest Street	Hansel and Gretel's house	

Source Soportújar Information Point. <https://soportujaralpujarr.wixsite.com/mapavirtual>

entrepreneurship among the local population to offer new services to tourists; structure the offer and the visitor circuit in the resort, so creating a local tourism product; improve and preserve anthropological and cultural values; improve digitalization of the resort; understand the demand better so as to be able to take quality decisions and lengthen the stay and the number of nights spent at the resort, so as to stop being a place where people spend the night en route to somewhere else” (MINCOTUR, 2020).

In view of the above and judging by the information provided by the current mayor, it would seem that until 2013, the tourist destination of Soportújar was characterized by small incipient growth in the number of visitors and from then until the end of 2019, this accelerated steadily. Visitors were above all day-trippers, especially at weekends and during special events/festivals, which were deliberately scheduled to try to reduce the seasonal nature of tourism. It was during this period that the village was themed with large sculptures relating to witchcraft, which were financed with the support of LEADER programme funds.

The Council selected the different locations for these sculptures/tourist attractions (Fig. 5), not only as a way of highlighting certain emblematic places in the village, but also to ensure that visitors did not concentrate in just a few small places.

According to the mayor, the number of visitors has grown sharply since 2019, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic, at times reaching unsustainable levels. In this process of growth which he described as “explosive”, the mayor claimed that a

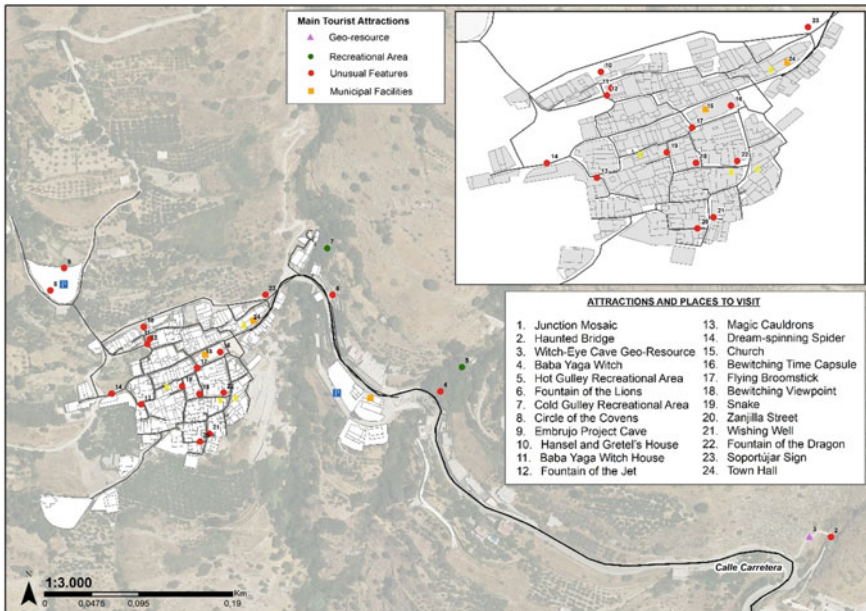


Fig. 5 Distribution within the municipality of Soportújar of the main tourist attractions related with the Embrujo Project. *Source* Soportújar Information Point. The authors

very important role was played not only by the irrepensible desire of city dwellers to travel to the countryside during the different periods of lockdown, but also by the enormous influence of social networks, in which the Council had been working very hard to try to promote the different attractions on offer in Soportújar.

Although at the beginning of the Embrujo Project, they scheduled a series of emblematic events to try to attract the maximum possible number of visitors spread out over the course of the year, such as the Night of the Witches, the Bewitched May (Maio embrujado) celebration, the Witchcraft Fair (Feria del Embrujo), etc., today the aim is to spread out these dates across the calendar so as to avoid excessively large crowds.

Indeed, the current situation is one of applying measures to try to control the number of visitors, as there have been situations in which the Council have had to request the intervention of Civil Protection units and the Civil Guard (rural police force). Such apparently drastic measures were justified by the fact that in a village with just 259 inhabitants, their most emblematic event, the Witchcraft Fair, was attended by over 20,000 people.

According to the mayor, the decision not to promote the village on social media meant that the summer of 2022 was less crowded, although according to the Council the normal number of visitors at weekends is around 2000.

This often leads to long lines of cars being parked on the narrow hard shoulders of a two-way regional road with an approximate width of just 7 m, leading up to the entrance to the village. In order to avoid this and to eliminate the risks it could cause, they are creating new access routes and already have two large car parks. Within the built-up area of the village, a new pedestrianized square is planned. This will extend the route that visitors normally follow as a way of reducing overcrowding.

Although the Council has ever-increasing costs in the maintenance of the burgeoning infrastructures and in offering quality services to tourists/day-trippers, most of the themed figures that have been installed in the village and its surrounding area are free of charge and therefore do not generate income for the Council. With this in mind, they have recently created and improved a new range of products for which tourists have to pay. The highlight is the Witchcraft Interpretation Centre, which was redeveloped and expanded in October 2022, and enables visitors to see, hear and read about village traditions with different types of holographic, 3-D and virtual displays. At the same time, there are plans within the provincial digitalization project promoted by the Granada Provincial Council to make it possible for anyone to find out online in real time about the availability of the tourism products on offer in Soportújar, so as to avoid overcrowding and enhance the quality of the experience and the sustainability of tourism in the village.

There is therefore a clear drive towards innovation of the tourist resort and they are working hard to have it officially recognized as a “Tourism Municipality”. This is considered a strategic objective for the village, as it would mean, firstly, increasing the prestige of the tourism product range, which has already received official recognition with the “Tourism in Granada Award 2021”, and secondly, achieving greater financial stability, a key question when looking towards the future and guaranteeing quality.

4.3 Results of the Implementation of the Embrujo Project in Soportújar

The Embrujo Project has brought considerable changes in the appearance of the village of Soportújar with the installation of a considerable number of themed figures (Fig. 5), which have undoubtedly made it stand out from the rest of the towns and villages in the Alpujarra. It has also enabled the recovery of spaces that had previously been abandoned such as the Witch-Eye Cave, or some of the threshing circles, such as the Circle of the Covens, while other spaces, such as the Haunted Bridge, have been completely remodelled.

There have also been a large number of building works of “lesser impact”, which have also contributed to giving the village its own unique appearance: insects on the facades, magic cauldrons in the street, a huge web-spinning spider, a Fountain of the Dragon with magically aphrodisiac waters, an enormous snake on a *tinajo* (typical architectural feature of the Alpujarra), thematically designed lampposts along, etc. Theming the village has been possible thanks not only to the participation of LEADER funds but also due to LaB.958 project, which in 2019 promoted the development of tangible contents with an impact on the landscape. These include, among others the dragonfly on the facade of a house or a statue located on the path leading to the O’Sel Ling Buddhist centre.

The Embrujo Project has also recently helped improve the infrastructures and services provided in the municipality. According to information from the Town Council, these include public works aimed at improving the stability of the terrain on which the village is built, which consists largely of soft materials on steep slopes, which over the course of its history have been a source of risk for the population. Important efforts have also been made to remove all water pipes made of fibre cement, improve the wastewater drainage system and repair the surface of many of the streets. As a result of the arrival of large numbers of visitors, the street cleaning system has also been improved and the plan is to automate it; a playpark for children has been opened, as has a gym on the ground floor of the multipurpose building in the Alfeizar Sports Complex. In August 2020, the new municipal swimming pool was inaugurated and FTTH fibre-optic broadband of 1 GB (high speed) is now available, etc.

The project has also enabled the Council to begin the procedures to create networks with other towns and cities, which has also opted for promoting magic and/or witchcraft, such as Salem (United States), Salisbury (United Kingdom), Escazú (Costa Rica), Benevento (Italy) and several others. Relations with these towns will be promoted to generate synergies in the coming years.

Above all, the Embrujo Project has created numerous activities in relation to the main witchcraft theme, which has produced an increase in the number of visitors, which in turn has enabled improvements in the village that have changed the lifestyle of its residents. While initially there were moments of euphoria, there have also been complaints about noise and overcrowding, especially during special events and weekends, which have led some people to complain that it is better not to stay in the village when these are on. However, we have also been able to verify, as will be

explained in future research, that the mayor was being truthful when he argued that “*everyone in the village is aware that there are job opportunities now and that the village is being revitalized*”.

A number of key facts prove what he was saying. The village has gone from having just two bars to 11 today; from having just one shop to having 10 today. There is also a demand for housing which has led to an increase in the price of land. It is now possible to obtain cash and carry out various bank transactions after an ATM machine was installed in the village, and perhaps the most important of all, from being in a situation where the school was under threat of closure, they now have 12 children enrolled and they expect two more to join next year.

4.4 Has the Success of the Embrujo Project Helped Revitalize Soportújar in Demographic Terms?

In order to carry out an initial assessment of the effects of the project on the village, we will take the period 2000–2021 as a reference, although the information obtained in the in-depth interviews with the mayor and some of the residents, and that obtained from local and provincial press and the municipal website, all coincide in stating that no significant works to attract visitors were carried out until the end of 2009.

The data from the municipal census of inhabitants are crystal clear when it comes to answering this question. The Embrujo Project has not managed to revitalize the municipality in demographic terms (Fig. 6). In fact, on the basis of the official data, not only has the population of the village fallen compared with the year 2000, but the tendency from the year 2019, in which there were large public works and investments in the village is also one of the decline.

The trend in Soportújar is downwards, in contrast to the rest of Spain, Andalusia, the province of Granada and even the Alpujarra Granadina, the sub-region in which the village is located. The brusque changes in population trends in the village over the course of this period are also quite surprising.

The most likely explanation is that municipal censuses do not always reflect the real demographic situation of the town. In the case of Soportújar, the current mayor claims that “*there is clear under-registration as a result of the particular characteristics of the population of the village*”. This is because there are a large number of elderly people who do not live in the village all year round. Many of them have houses in Granada or in other towns and cities where they are registered for census purposes and so gain access to certain services that are not available to them in the village. The result is that the number of people officially listed in the municipal census as residents of Soportújar is far below the real number.

Another important factor is that the village is just 19 min away from Órgiva, the capital of the Alpujarra region and just over an hour’s drive from the city of Granada. As a result, there are a considerable percentage of people, estimated at around 20%, who have a house and/or work in the village, but are registered elsewhere.

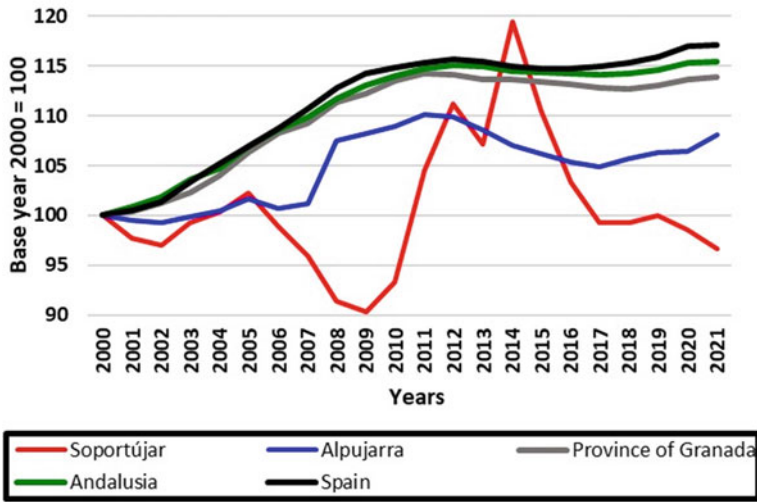


Fig. 6 Trend in the population of Soportújar between 2000 and 2021 (base year 2000 = 100). Source Municipal Census of Inhabitants. Drawn up by the authors

Figure 6 shows a sharp rise in population between 2009 and 2014. According to the mayor, this was due to “a concerted campaign by the Council to encourage people from the village to register there”. In 2009, the population had fallen below the critical figure of 250 residents (to 242 to be precise) and according to Article 179 of the Organic Law governing the General Electoral Regime (LOREG, 1985), the Council assembly would have had to downsize from seven councillors (the number corresponding to municipalities of between 251 and 1000 residents), to just five (the number for municipalities with 101 to 250 residents), which would have had a series of disadvantages of different kinds for the village.

The mayor said that local people responded very positively to this campaign as evidenced by the population figures for the following years, but as time went by, the benefits that large towns and cities can offer the people who are registered in them began to weigh too heavily, so leading to the downward trend in population from 2014. This phenomenon of under-registration should be studied in greater detail, as it is harming many small villages and can create a false image that the situation is worse than it really is.

Small rural municipalities face a series of problems that require new legislation that improves their rights and avoids the type of problems mentioned earlier, which will have very negative effects on their functioning and on efforts to anchor the population. It would be important to guarantee the obligatory provision of more services of better quality, something that is not achieved by the current Law setting out the Basis of the Local Government Regime (LBRL, 1985). Not making progress in this area means perpetuating a discriminatory situation of unequal rights depending on where you live. One possible measure that could help anchor the population in small villages would be to group them together into larger, more effective units within which the

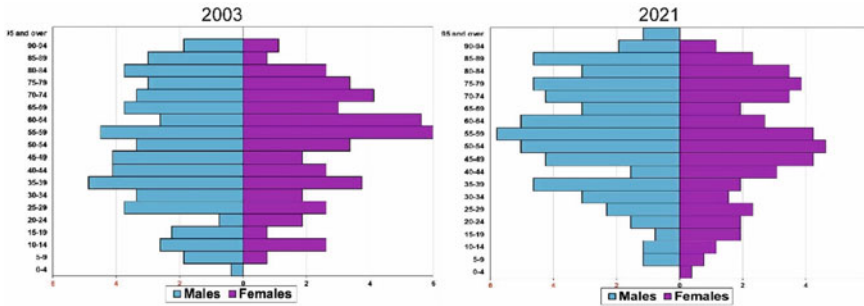


Fig. 7 Population pyramids for Soportújar in 2003 (left) and 2021 (right). *Source* Drawn up by the authors on the basis of information from the Municipal Census of Inhabitants

population of small villages would have the same rights to services as the residents of large towns. At present, Soportújar is a member of a new grouping of municipalities (*mancomunidad*) in a bid to improve its future development possibilities.

The relative overall stability in the number of inhabitants between the year 2000 and 2021 masks the worrying process of demographic ageing. This can be seen not only in the increase in the average age, which has gone up from 48 to 53 and is therefore ten years higher than the average for southern Spain, but also in its ageing index which has shot up from 312 to 631. This means that for every young person under 16 in the village, there are more than six people over 64. The masculinization of the village population also continues albeit at a slower pace (falling from 114 men per 100 women in 2000 to 107 in 2021). The harsh reality of the official statistics confirms what the mayor said in the interview: “*The young people left the village years ago*”. The seriousness of this situation can be seen in the pyramid for 2021 (Fig. 7).

These processes have obvious economic repercussions in the sense that the proportion of the population who are economically dependent on the population of working age is higher (58%) than the average for the south of Spain (52%). However, the unemployment rate in the village of 15.4% in 2021 was 10 percentage points lower than the figure for 2012 and was among the lowest for municipalities in southern Spain. This situation should be understood within a context in which the jobseekers (17) are mainly older people, 71% are aged between 45 and 64, a figure which again indicates that young people tend to look for work outside the village.

Within this demographic context, in which there is also evidence that the farming sector is no longer the main source of income, we found that the services sector concentrates on most jobs and generates most income. This was already reflected in the huge increase in the number of retail establishments and restaurants as a result of the implementation of the Embrujo Project. What is more, the village went from having just two tourist accommodation facilities in 2016 to having five today, with a total of 35 places. Although this is a substantial increase, it is still clear that the number of places is insufficient to cover the demand in terms of visitors to the village, which would suggest that in the future the number will increase, especially when

there is evidence that there are empty houses that need to be refurbished that could be used as tourist accommodation or could be of interest to potential buyers from other parts of the country.

In short, according to the mayor, today over 90% of the economy and employment in the village is based on the tourist activity created by the Embrujo Project, which is now its main element of economic growth and of potential sustainable development.

The negative trend revealed by our analysis of the data from the municipal census contrasts with the opinion of the mayor, which is based on his in-depth, first-hand knowledge of the real situation in the village. The Embrujo Project has attracted a huge number of day-trippers and fewer tourists, and these visitors are not generating the economic revenues that potentially might be obtained if the village had more tourist accommodation on offer and better infrastructures and services.

“Most of those who have invested in the creation of businesses in the village are not people who have traditionally lived there”. The mayor clarified that to a large extent they are sons and daughters of people from the village who lived in large cities and who for various reasons (wanting to change job, wanting to live a less stressful life in closer contact with nature, wanting to be closer to their families, for the economic opportunities, etc.) decided to set-up a business in Soportújar. Unfortunately, this does not always mean that they live in the village. There are also some foreign neo-rurals.

Should this trend, which is not reflected in the municipal census of inhabitants, be confirmed and given the very likely growth in tourism (or day-trippers) in Soportújar, it seems probable that the resident population will increase in coming years. This affirmation is based on the increase in the number of children enrolled in the school and the number of businesses in the village, which have created new jobs.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

The results obtained in this research show that Soportújar has suffered a long process of severe depopulation, as have the vast majority of remote, mountain villages in Southern Europe. We consulted various sources (official statistics and interviews), which confirm that the harsh physical conditions have made it difficult to adapt their main, traditional economic sector, farming, to the globalized market economy. However, human factors have also played a fundamental role, especially those arising from the particular historical development of the uses and the working of the land, together with political decisions by the Spanish government to concentrate investments in certain cities and regions during the middle of the twentieth century. This resulted in a mass exodus from the countryside and depopulation, which in Soportújar was even more intense than in the Alpujarra Granadina as a whole, one of the regions with the worst population dynamics in the south of Spain.

Something had to be done to prevent the village from disappearing. This led various people who had been born in the village and who had left to obtain high levels of education and professional training at the University of Granada, to decide

to come back to live in the village after a time away. They took up responsibilities in the running of municipal affairs (political positions in the Town Council). This enabled them to assess the possibilities of the different local resources and on that basis design a strategy that could revitalize the village economy and halt its depopulation. This highlights the important role that can be played by neo-rurals, who bring knowledge and experience and on occasions high qualifications, as dynamizing forces in the rural world. This suggests that research should be conducted into their participation in innovation processes aimed at stimulating economic growth/development in municipalities at risk of depopulation.

In this case, local leaders decided to promote a cultural resource of an anthropological nature, witchcraft, an integral part of the history of the village and of the identity of local people. A large number of them, as can be seen from an analysis of their surnames, were descendants of settlers from Galicia in north-west Spain who came to the Alpujarra after the expulsion of the *moriscos* at the end of the sixteenth century. These incomers brought with them Celtic rituals and festivals, in which witches and witchcraft were strongly rooted.

The decision to promote this theme was made easier by the fact that the people of the Alpujarra Granadina still refer to the residents of Soportújar as *brujas* and *brujos* (witches and wizards). However, it is important to point out that during the theming of the village, various figures were imported from other cultures and traditions, a slight departure from the original identity-based vision that seems to prioritize commercial considerations. There has also been a clear commitment to incorporate the most modern technological innovations, which could create a much greater capacity to attract visitors in the future. This also involves a degree of risk that must be taken into account, given that at certain times the optimum number of visitors that can be handled by the village has been far exceeded.

The results obtained show that the campaign to attract visitors, in this case mostly day-trippers rather than tourists who stay in the village, has helped diversify the economic structure of the municipality, as has happened in many other parts of Andalusia and of Spain as a whole (Cejudo García & Maroto Martos, 2007; Foronda Robles, 2008; Maroto Martos et al., 2017). This has led to an increase in investments (Maroto Martos et al., 2017), in the number of businesses (Cejudo García et al., 2021; Foronda Robles, 2008; López Cotelo & López Galán, 2018; Navarro Valverde et al., 2013, 2018, 2020) and in employment (Cejudo García et al., 2022; Gallardo-Cobos, 2018; Maroto Martos et al., 2017). The use of endogenous resources in general (Navarro Valverde et al., 2022) and of cultural resources in particular, based on the intangible anthropological identity of the local population (Cejudo García et al., 2019; Roigé et al., 2019; Ruiz Salas, 2019), have been essential strategies in the attempt to breathe new life into the village.

Although there are many different forms of evidence that show that the mayor's claims are true, according to official statistical sources (i.e. the municipal census), the demographic trend in Soportújar has not improved and if anything is in decline. However, the mayor and the local residents interviewed have direct knowledge of the area and a much more detailed picture of the real situation than that which can be gauged merely by reading the official population figures. In this case, therefore,

the reliability of official statistics should perhaps be called into question. This may also be true in other small villages undergoing a similar trend towards depopulation.

In short, although there is a contradiction between the conclusions that can be reached by analyzing the data from official sources and those based on the real situation as seen by people who live in the village, which is much more optimistic, it is possible to conclude by saying that there is sufficient evidence to argue that in Soportújar, the Embrujo Project is establishing a solid basis for the revitalization of the village in demographic and economic terms by making it an attractive destination for daytrips and rural tourism.

6 Limitations and Future Lines of Research

We are currently working to improve the main results of this study, by conducting more in-depth interviews with the different groups who make up the local population, looking at different age groups, women, businesspeople, neo-rurals, opposition parties to the current local government, people from other neighbouring villages, representatives of the Provincial Council, of the Rural Development Group, employees of shops and restaurants and finally of visitors, both tourists and day-trippers. The current and potential quality of Soportújar as a tourist destination is also being analyzed.

It is necessary to increase the number of case studies that use the municipality as the unit of analysis. To gather information from the mayors of towns and villages at risk of depopulation and compare them with other sources is another line of research that should be further developed. Another line of investigation that we consider crucial for the future is to create a reliable, much broader database than the one that is currently available, so as to gain a better picture of the real situation in these villages and enable us to make comparisons.

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Learning From Failed Initiatives. Fallen Projects in Rural Development

Starting a Business Through LEADER as a Means of Combatting Rural Depopulation. Obstacles that Prevented Women and Young People from Doing So



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Abstract The key role played by LEADER will feature highly in any evaluation of changes in rural Europe over the last 30 years, especially in terms of the implementation of a new methodology in the design of policies that would effectively stimulate rural development. This explains why there is such a huge body of literature on this subject. At the same time, however, little research has been done on the reasons why some projects that embarked on the LEADER grant application procedure were ultimately not carried out with LEADER funds. This study seeks to discover the reasons behind the non-execution of what we refer to as “failed projects”, by applying a qualitative methodology centred on in-depth interviews with self-employed businesspeople who promoted projects of this kind. Within this group, we differentiated between age, sex and the area in which they planned to set up their business. The results highlight that the most frequent cause of failure was economic difficulties, which are analysed from different perspectives. Those interviewed were also severely critical of the work of the LAGs. Criticisms were particularly strong amongst young people and young women in particular. We also observed differences in the causes of failure between the areas where population is growing or declining, although we were unable to establish a clear pattern linking these causes and the areas in which the promoters planned to invest.

Keywords Entrepreneurship · Depopulation · Youth · Woman · Gender inequality

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1 Introduction and State of the Question

For some decades now, there has been an important need to propose strategies, policies and programmes in support of rural development. These strategies, which should not be focused exclusively on achieving economic growth, are especially necessary in the remote areas situated furthest away from centres of business activity or places in which public and private services are provided. In the case of rural Europe, these strategies have been accompanied by a long-desired economic diversification after it became glaringly obvious that local people could no longer survive solely on farming. In many cases, these changes brought renewed economic dynamism and social recovery to deprived rural areas. However, with the passage of time, many of these processes have not been fully consolidated either in Spain or within the broader European context (Pont-Vidal, 2020). This new method of approaching rural development is structured around theoretical/methodological principles of a neo-endogenous nature (Cejudo García & Navarro Valverde, 2020) in which the local territory becomes the fertile soil in which the different development actions must take root. This will happen to the extent that rural development policy manages to connect, through its various actions, with the potentialities of the territory where it is being implemented, of its “places” (Nogué, 2016), in line with its needs, its powers and its entrepreneurship possibilities. In this sense, there must be a deliberate, decisive commitment to initiatives promoted by members of civil society, which must be an active agent in its own development, with the valorization of endogenous territorial resources, which in the vast majority of cases are anchored to the local territory and cannot be moved elsewhere (Copus et al., 2020). All of this must take place within the framework of a much broader global strategy that enables specific local needs to be addressed.

From this new perspective, two basic principles emerge. Firstly, the role that institutions can play in this new approach. As opposed to hierarchical decision-making and planning processes carried out externally and without consulting the people in the areas in which they are implemented, it is essential to ensure collaboration between public and private actors, in which the former provides advice and support to ensure that the latter’s projects come to fruition, so strengthening the resilience of these areas (Neumeier, 2017). Secondly, the progressive introduction of a new form of territorial governance, not only as an effective means of avoiding conflicts and tensions between the actors, but also as a way of steering projects down the path towards success (Esparcia & Abbasi, 2020). It must also act as a basic mechanism of citizen participation when it comes to thinking about, designing and building the future of the territories and fulfilling the aspirations of local people. These are the main pillars on which the LEADER approach is based: a territorial perspective, integrated actions across many sectors, economic diversification, a bottom-up approach, social and other forms of innovation and the creation of public/private partnerships. LEADER is without doubt the most important, most innovative attempt by the European Union to bring about rural development in Europe, and in other areas for which it could act as a reference (Cejudo García et al., 2021).

Despite these efforts, the abandonment of rural areas continues unabated with the exception perhaps of those situated within the concentric circles around large cities and their metropolitan areas, rural areas near the coast, or market towns that act as hubs for their surrounding areas and enjoy good access to a full range of public services and facilities. Population numbers in these more remote rural areas continue to fall in what is a terrible drain on their most important resource. These depopulation processes started a long time ago and, in some cases, have ended with an empty village all of whose inhabitants have either died or left to “seek their fortunes” elsewhere (Molinero Hernando, 2019, 2022). This is why the so-called demographic challenge, in which abandonment, ageing and masculinization are all critical factors, has become a question of state for the governments of European countries, especially those in the Mediterranean region, of which Spain is no exception (Cejudo García & Navarro Valverde, 2023). All of this in spite of noting the recent and progressive consolidation in rural Europe of new socioeconomic and spatial realities that are the result of social change, of a change in the paradigm if you will, as a result of the rediscovery of these spaces as places that are lived in and experienced (Nogué, 2016). This has enabled new projects, attitudes, values and forms of organization to appear. These began prior to the economic crisis of 2008 and were accentuated by it, a process that was further consolidated by COVID-19 (Bertolino, 2022; Cersosimo & Nisticò, 2021).

The fact remains however that there is something of a cultural and perceptual gap as to why and for what this increasingly urbanite society needs these distant, inland, peripheral areas. As a result, they continue to be viewed as spaces for leisure, amusement and recreation rather than as spaces in which people can live, work, raise their children and interact with each other (Camarero, 2020; Ferrás Sexto, 2021; Grandi et al., 2022). Bridging this gap, albeit slowly, is essential if we want to halt depopulation (Molina et al., 2020).

Within this context, rural exodus processes affect different rural areas and different social groups, including above all, women and young people, in different ways (see Fig. 1 for Andalusia). The economic crisis of 2008 and the recent pandemic caused by COVID-19 have led on the one hand to a slight demographic recovery in which many municipalities in Andalusia, and indeed in other parts of rural Spain, have seen their numbers increase (Nieto Calmaestra & Capote Lama, 2020; Serrano & Fajardo, 2022). However, there is increasing evidence that this change was only transitory and was based above all on people moving temporarily to second homes in the countryside, which they are now beginning to desert in a generalized return to the city (Camarero, 2020). Other research shows that women and young people are the social groups that have the most difficulties when it comes to starting a business, in the economy in general, and within the specific context of LEADER (Alario Trigueros & Morales Prieto, 2023; Cejudo García et al., 2020a, 2020b; Escribano et al., 2023). In addition, the flexibilization of the labour market, which intensified after the crisis of 2008, and the reduction of social protection mechanisms as a result of budget cutbacks, “forced” them to set up their own businesses out of need, often in situations when they did not have sufficient finance or assets to tackle this challenge properly (Alvarez-Sousa, 2019; Dijkstra et al., 2015; Martín & Tovar, 2019).

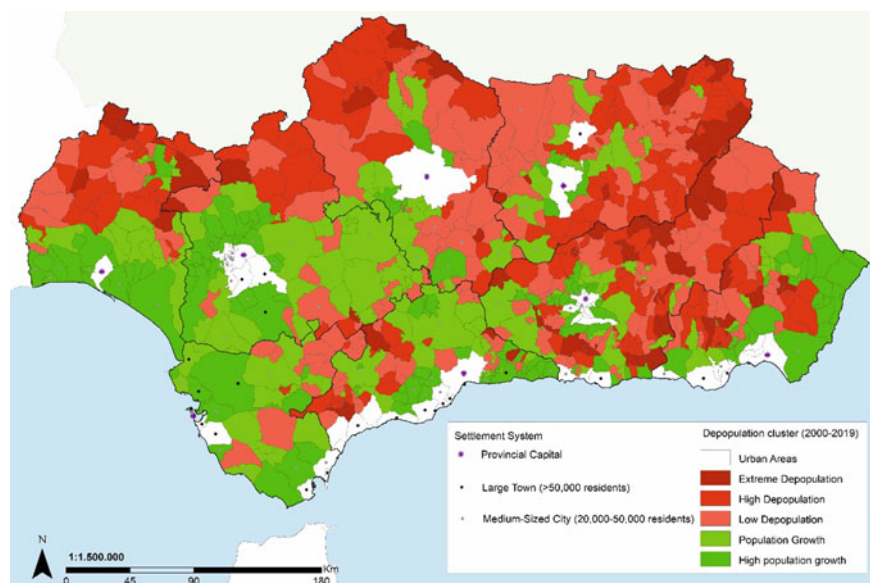


Fig. 1 Map of Andalusia showing the types of municipalities according to variations in the population over the period 2000–2019. *Source* Censuses of population. Drawn up by the authors

In spite of LEADER’s potential: (i) for creating employment in country areas (Cejudo García et al., 2022; Rodríguez Molina et al., 2019); (ii) for encouraging the active participation of non-profit associations (Cejudo-García et al., 2021); and (iii) as an effective tool and methodology for rural development, although clearly insufficient due to the limited funds it manages, it has also acquired a number of “bad habits” that impair its correct functioning and damage its results. Without seeking to be exhaustive in any way, these include the absence of real public participation in its design and implementation (Midmore, 1998), which enables it to be controlled by small elites and groups within society (Dargan & Shucksmith, 2008; Esparcia Pérez, 2000; Furmankiewicz et al., 2016); the uneven territorial distribution of the financial resources which ends up favouring those areas which are already more dynamic (Cañete Pérez et al., 2018a, 2018b; Nieto Masot & Cárdenas Alonso, 2017); the limitations of the LAGs when it comes to decision-making, restrained by the controls imposed upon them by the regional administration, which seriously compromise its bottom-up approach (Bosworth et al., 2016; Navarro et al., 2016; Tirado Ballesteros & Hernández Hernández, 2019) or finally the increased bureaucratization and the slow response of the administration, which ends up discouraging businesspeople, especially when it comes to presenting new, innovative projects which often take longer to approve (Navarro-Valverde et al., 2022).

One of the aspects that have rarely been discussed in relation to LEADER and when it has, has been done so in insufficient depth, is the study of what we call “failed projects”, i.e. those which after beginning the administrative procedure to apply for

a LEADER grant to start up a project, are ultimately not carried out or if they are, are carried out without the financial support of LEADER. There is relatively little bibliography on this question and some of the references only touch on it indirectly. For example, Dargan and Shucksmith (2008) talk about a “project class”, a group with high financial capacity, knowledge and the capacity to innovate, who control and are informed about LEADER procedures and strategies, while other groups in society, such as young people and women participate much less, even though they have certain advantages in the selection and financing of their projects (Viladomiu Canela et al., 2010). In the case of women, Driga et al. (2009) associated this with a lower propensity to set up businesses in country areas, even though they seemed less afraid of failure than men. The most direct references to this question can be found in papers by researchers from the Universities of Granada and Extremadura. The research papers on the impact of LEADER in Andalusia for the 2000–2006 programming (Cañete Pérez et al., 2018a, 2018b; Navarro Valverde et al., 2018) highlighted the need to improve the processes for the selection and continued monitoring of the projects in line with the territories in which they plan to implement them; they also found that the typical profile of a “failed” businessman or woman was that of a young person, especially a young woman, who was trying to set up her own business, essentially as a self-employed person or in some cases as a limited company or partnership (*comunidad de bienes*) (Cejudo García, et al., 2021a, 2021b). On these same lines, a recent paper on a broader scale than this last one (Cejudo García et al., 2020a, 2020b) found that the success/failure of a project varies according to the type of project, the type of promoter and the territory in which they plan to implement it. Similar studies were conducted for Extremadura by (Engelmo Moriche et al., 2021) assessing the success or failure of LEADER projects on the basis of their long-term duration or on the basis of the spatial distribution of the failed projects (Cañete et al., 2020). Similar results were obtained.

A common feature of all these various research studies is that they were conducted on the basis of a statistical analysis of the data supplied by the regional administrations. This study takes a completely different, much more qualitative approach when it comes to finding out the reasons why these things happen. It aims in short and as a general objective to find out directly “from the horse’s mouth”, in this case from the main stakeholders, the real reasons why these initiatives were either not carried out, or were executed without LEADER funding. We will do this by focusing on two social groups, young people and women, who are important to the extent that they represent the best glimmer of hope for the future of villages that are already suffering severe depopulation. They are also the group that faces the greatest obstacles when it comes to setting up businesses and in part for their proposals to succeed. For this purpose, we propose the following specific objectives: to find out whether there are differences between the “official causes”, as recorded by the relevant authorities in the file for each project and those mentioned by the applicants themselves; classify the causes of failure, and identify any differences between them in terms of sex, age and territory. All these questions are essential for addressing the challenge involved in stemming the exodus from country towns and villages. Our initial hypothesis is that these causes are linked to a range of economic questions which contribute to the

failure of these projects, especially bearing in mind the context of economic crisis in which these initiatives were proposed.

2 Metrology, Sources and Study Area

The basic source used in the qualitative analysis of these projects was the database provided by the Directorate General of Sustainable Development of the Department of Agriculture, Fishing and Rural Development of the Regional Government of Andalusia, which listed all the LEADER files opened between 2007 and 2015. The database lists both the projects that were implemented with LEADER funds and those that were not. Of a total of 12,885 applications, 6630 were unsuccessful. On the basis of this information, we selected the promoters we wanted to interview. The statistical information necessary for the typological classification of the municipalities in Andalusia according to their demographic growth/decline between 2000 and 2019 came from the census of population available in the Andalusia Multi-Territorial Information System (SIMA) and the cartographic databases in vector format from the Andalusia Statistics and Cartography Institute.

In methodological terms, the qualitative analysis was conducted through in-depth interviews for which we prepared a questionnaire. This included several different sections on: the promoter; the project; the reasons for failure; and the personal and territorial obstacles they faced, amongst others. This general model was adapted to the different categories of businesspeople established earlier and included specific questions for each one. After testing the questionnaire in fieldwork, we corrected the errors that had been detected. The interviews were carried out by telephone, in most cases, and online between May 2021 and July 2022. This was due to restrictions on mobility due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the reluctance of participants to participate in face-to-face interviews when these were permitted. Finally, the interviews were transcribed and the results were tabulated in Likert scales.

Locating the promoters of these projects proved hard work in that, in the case of companies, many had been wound up and in the case of individual entrepreneurs, the time that had gone by and the restrictions when it came to obtaining their postal address or telephone number made it very difficult or impossible to contact them. Something similar happened with institutional stakeholders such as local councils, where in many cases the promoter (the mayor or the person delegated to act as such) was no longer in office. Our job was complicated even further by their reluctance to talk about a failed, frustrating experience or simply because they could not remember much about it.

We conducted a total of 109 interviews, 51 of which were carried out with self-employed people. These are the 51 interviews analysed here. The distribution according to age, sex and type of territory is set out in Table 1.

The territorial classification applied in the study area was established on the basis of the demographic trend in the rural municipalities since the year 2000. The data cover the period from the beginning of the year 2000 to the end of 2019 given that

Table 1 Distribution of self-employed interviewees according to age, sex and type of territory

Territory	Men						Women						Total	
	Adult		Young		Total		Adult		Young		Total			
	No.	Av. age	No.	Av. age	No.	Av. age	No.	Av. age	No.	Av. age	No.	Av. age	No.	Av. age
Extreme depopulation	2	43.0	1	35.0	3	40.3			1	26.0	1	26	4	36.8
High depopulation	1	50.0	3	29.3	4	34.5	3	46.3	1	30.0	4	42.3	8	38.4
Slight depopulation	6	49.3	1	33.0	7	47.0	3	43.0	4	28.0	7	34.4	14	40.7
Increase in population	2	52.5	1	32.0	3	45.7	2	47.0	2	31.0	4	39.0	7	41.9
High increase in population	6	47.8	2	24.0	8	41.9	5	44.6	5	26.4	10	35.5	18	38.3
Total	17	48.5	8	29.5	25	42.4	13	45.0	13	27.8	26	36.4	51	39.4

the population figures used are from the census update for 1st January 2020, which means they are prior to the pandemic and unaffected by it. The distinction between rural and non-rural municipalities was made on the basis of whether or not they had received LEADER grants over the period 2000–2017, i.e. the last two fully completed programming periods. Of the various methods available (de Cos Guerra & Reques Velasco, 2019; Molinero Hernando & Alario Trigueros, 2019; Reig Martínez et al., 2016), this one has the advantage of following the criteria used by the European Union when it comes to assigning LEADER grants, the main objective of this study. The results are of interest to the extent that in spite of the apparent progressive interconnection between rural and urban areas in order to be able to apply for funds, the everyday experience of the LAGs in Andalusia shows that this is not happening. The identification of the different clusters has been carried out on the basis of five categories, three of which referred to population losses and two to population gains (Fig. 1).

A brief analysis of the socio-demographic characteristics of the different types of territories shows that the areas classified in this way as rural account for over 91% of the municipalities in Andalusia. They occupy over 90% of its surface area and are home to 52.55% of its population. Within this group, 60% of the municipalities showed a decline in population over the period 2000–2019, while the remaining 40% showed an increase, with an overall positive balance of over 11%. A quick glance at the spatial distribution of these municipalities confirms certain patterns that can be seen all over Spain. We are referring in particular to the fact that the areas most affected by depopulation are in remote inland mountainous areas such as Sierra Morena, the Baetic Systems, and the high plains of Granada. By contrast the areas with population gains are mostly distributed along coastal areas, the Guadalquivir Valley, the “Furrow” between the two Baetic Mountain Systems (Surco Intrabético)

and periurban areas, where these increases have been particularly high. Growth has also been observed in the areas classified as urban with an average increase in population of 17.6%.

3 Results

3.1 Promotors

3.1.1 Age and Sex

There was a balanced distribution of the interviewees by sex with 25 men and 26 women. If we look at the territories, we observe something similar in that 26 of the interviews were conducted in municipalities with a declining population. The numbers were inversely related with the degree of population decline, in that there were 4 interviewees from areas with extreme depopulation, 8 from areas with high depopulation and 14 from areas with slight depopulation. There were 25 interviews with people from municipalities with a growing population. A similar pattern can be observed as regards the number of interviewees. This is due to the fact that these towns have higher populations and therefore present more projects. As regards age, 21 interviewees were classified as young people (under 35 years old) and 30 as adults (over 35 s), of whom there were more women than men. The group of young women had an average age of 27.8, while the young men had an average age of 29.5. This age difference was also observed in the adult interviewees, with average ages of 45 (women) and 48.5 (men). The average age of all the interviewees was 39.4. It is also striking that bearing in mind the small number of cases analysed, the promotors in the municipalities with the highest levels of depopulation (extreme and high) had the lowest average ages of the five territorial categories established (Table 2).

3.1.2 Academic Background

As regards education, almost half of those interviewed, 47%, had university degrees. Only nine had just basic primary education, eight of whom were men, almost all adults. In general, therefore the interviewees had a high level of education and in particular the women, in that of the 23 university graduates, 16 were women, half of whom planned to set up businesses in areas with declining population levels. A similar territorial distribution can be seen in the men. The differences between the two sexes in terms of university education can be seen in both the adult interviewees, where there were five male graduates compared to ten females and in the group of young people, in which there were two male graduates compared to six females (Table 3).

Table 2 Age and sex of the promoters interviewed

Average age of the promoters														
Territory	Men						Women						Total	
	Adult		Young		Total		Adult		Young		Total			
	No.	Av. age	No.	Av. age	No.	Av. age	No.	Av. age	No.	Av. age	No.	Av. age	No.	Av. age
Extreme depopulation	2	43.0	1	35.0	3	40.3			1	26.0	1	26.0	4	36.8
High depopulation	1	50.0	3	29.3	4	34.5	3	46.3	1	30.0	4	42.3	8	38.4
Slight depopulation	6	49.3	1	33.0	7	47.0	3	43.0	4	28.0	7	34.4	14	40.7
Increase in population	2	52.5	1	32.0	3	45.7	2	47.0	2	31.0	4	39.0	7	41.9
High increase in population	6	47.8	2	24.0	8	41.9	5	44.6	5	26.4	10	35.5	18	38.3
Total	17	48.5	8	29.5	25	42.4	13	45.0	13	27.8	26	36.4	51	39.4

3.1.3 Match Between Professional Experience/Training and Project

Most of those interviewed (35 out of a total of 51) declared that their professional experience/training matched that of the project they had presented. This was particularly clear amongst women interviewees, 20 of whom declared as such, as compared to just 6 who stated otherwise. In men, although most agreed that they had the right professional background, the ratio was lower, with just 15 who said yes and ten who said no. In general, more young people claimed that they had the right experience for their project, with 15 saying yes and just 6 saying no. There was also a majority amongst the adult interviewees, although the proportion was smaller, with 20 saying yes and 10 saying no. However, this high match amongst the adult population was due to the overwhelming majority amongst female interviewees, 11 to 2. In men, by contrast there was an almost 50% split between yes and no answers (Table 4).

3.1.4 Current Employment Situation

Most of those interviewed, 36 people, were in work, as compared to 11 people who were unemployed. There were also two special situations, in that one person was a student and one did unpaid housework (housewife). Unemployment rates were similar, around 25%, in men and women. As regards age, the age group most affected by unemployment was young people, in which there were 10 in work and 8 unemployed, without counting the two special cases mentioned earlier. As well as high unemployment, young people also typically face problems such as access to the housing market or being able to leave their parental homes, amongst others. As

Table 4 Match between promoter's professional background/training and the project they applied for

Type of territory	Men				Women			
	Adult		Young		Adult		Young	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Extreme depopulation		2	1					1
High depopulation		1		3	1	2	1	
Slight depopulation	5	1	1			3	1	3
Increase in population	1	1		1	1	1	1	1
High increase in population	2	4		2		5	1	4
Total	8	9	2	6	2	11	4	9

regards territorial distribution, most of the unemployed people (8 of the 11) were from towns and villages in which the population was falling (Table 5).

3.1.5 Type of Work (Employed or Self-employed)

If we look at those in work who provided us with this information, there are a majority of self-employed workers compared to employees, with 25 and 12, respectively. In men, there is an even higher ratio of self-employed to employees at 13/5, while in women this ratio is lower at 12/7. As regards young people, most (6) are employed by others. 5 of these 6 are women, while within the self-employed young people, three are women and two are men. In the adults, self-employed work is a lot more common than employed work with 20 self-employed compared to just 6 employees. There is a similar split within the group of men and within the group of women. In territorial terms, there are no appreciable differences between self-employed workers as of the 25 for whom we have information, 12 live in municipalities where the population is falling and 13 in areas where it is rising. By contrast, in employed workers certain differences can be observed, in that of the 12 employed people, 8 live in municipalities with varying degrees of depopulation and just 4 live in areas in which population is rising (Table 6).

3.2 Presenting Their Projects

3.2.1 Year of Presentation

The years in which most projects were presented are 2010, with 16, and 2012, with 11 (Table 7). It is interesting to note that 29 projects were presented between 2012 and 2014 while just 22 were presented in the previous three years. This large number

Table 6 Type of work done by the promoter

Territory	Men						Women					
	Adult			Young			Adult			Young		
	Employee	Self-emp	n.d	Employee	Self-emp	n.d	Employee	Self-emp	n.d	Employee	Self-emp	n.d
Extreme depopulation		1	1		1							
High depopulation		1		1		2		2				1
Slight depopulation	2	4				1		1	1	1	2	1
Increase in population	1	1			1			2				2
High increase in population	1	4	1			2		4		1	2	1
Total	4	11	2	1	2	5	2	9	2	5	3	5

Table 7 Year of presentation of the proposal

Year	Men		Women		Total
	Adult	Young	Adult	Young	
2009				2	2
2010	4	4	5	3	16
2011	1		1	2	4
2012	6	2	1	2	11
2013	4	1	2	2	9
2014	2	1	4	2	9
Total	17	8	13	13	51

of projects at the end of the programming period, including the extension, is probably due to the bureaucratic formalities required to get a LEADER project off the ground, and all the information that must then be provided by the potential applicants about the implementation of the project. In addition, the fact that many people expected the deadline for presenting applications to be extended, and the huge delays in processing the applications meant that the decisions on grants were concentrated at the end of the programming period. From a territorial point of view, most of the failed projects presented in municipalities with extreme and high depopulation problems were presented in the first years, 2009–2011, while in the municipalities in which there has been substantial population growth, they were mainly presented at the end of the period analysed (2012–2014).

3.2.2 The Municipality in Which the Promoter Presents the Project and Lives

The vast majority of promoters planned to carry out the project in the municipality in which they lived, with 42 cases as opposed to just eight who wished to carry it out somewhere else, although always within the same LAG area. In the case of the 8 people who planned to carry out the project somewhere else, six were adults and just two were young people. Of these six adults, four were women and two were men, which in spite of the small sample group, seems relevant in relation to the important role played by women in the development of rural areas in their role as entrepreneurs. These eight cases were distributed equally (50%) between municipalities in which the population was increasing/falling (Table 8).

3.2.3 Project Objectives

In most cases (28), the objective of the project was to set up a new business. This was followed by those who planned to modernize their business (17) and those who

Table 8 Relationship between the municipality where the promoter lived and the place where he/she planned to carry out the project

Territory	Men				Women					
	Adult		Young		Adult			Young		
	Same	Diff.	Same	Diff.	Same	Diff.	n.d	Same	Diff.	
Extreme depopulation	2		1						1	
High depopulation		1	2	1	2	1			1	
Slight depopulation	6		1		2	1			4	
Increase in population	2		1		2				2	
High increase in population	5	1	2		2	2	1		4	1
Total	15	2	7	1	8	4	1		12	1

sought to expand it (6). The large numbers of people setting up new businesses are either due to the fact that they were unemployed and had to create jobs for themselves or perhaps, in the case of salaried employees, because they were afraid of losing their jobs during the severe economic crisis situation in which LEADER was carried out during this programming period. A majority of male promoters sought the continuity of an existing business by means of its expansion or modernization rather than creating a new business, with a majority of 13 to 12, while women opted more for creating new businesses and to a lesser extent for modernizing or expanding an existing business, with 16 cases compared to 10. These differences in favour of creating new businesses are even more pronounced in the group of young people, while in adults the opposite occurs. In young people, 16 planned to create new businesses and just 5 planned to continue with an existing one. In adults, 12 planned to create a new business, while 18 wanted to modernize or expand an existing one. In territorial terms, those who planned to set up new businesses, planned to do so at similar levels in municipalities in which population was falling or rising, with 13 and 15 cases, respectively; in projects related to modernization, most were proposed in municipalities with falling populations, 10 compared to 7, while the projects aimed at business expansion were equally distributed (Table 9).

3.2.4 The Time that Elapsed Before an Answer Was Received from the Administration

It takes a very long time for applicants to receive an answer from the administration, with the result that in an economic crisis situation and when the main objective of many promoters was to create a job for themselves, a lot ended up abandoning their projects. This is what happened in 31 cases where this information was provided. In a third (10) of these the administration took more than one year to respond to the application, and in 21 cases it took less. In this case, as one might expect, there were no differences in delay times with regard to sex or age. Others could not remember how long this took, although it is interesting to note that a higher percentage of young

Table 9 What the promoter planned to do

Territory	Men						Women					
	Adult			Young			Adult			Young		
	Expand	Create	Modernize	Expand	Create	Modernize	Expand	Create	Modernize	Expand	Create	Modernize
Extreme depopulation	1	1		1								1
High depopulation			1		2	1	1	1			1	
Slight depopulation		2	4		1			2	1			3
Increase in population	2					1					2	
High increase in population		4	2		2		1	2	2			5
Total	3	7	7	1	5	2	2	5	6	11		2

people remembered than adults. This is shown by the fact that of the 20 cases in which respondents said they could not remember, only six were young people (Table 10).

3.2.5 The Planned Investment and the Grant for Which They Applied

In the 51 projects, the promoters planned to invest a total of 3.2 million euros with an average investment per project of 62,913 euros. They hoped to cover a large chunk (68.1%) of this total with public aid, applying for a total of 2.1 million euros in LEADER grants.

Male promoters planned to invest just over 2 million euros while women planned to invest about half this amount. Even though men and women presented a very similar number of projects, the average planned investment by male promoters was much higher at approximately 82,000 euros per project compared to around 45,000 euros for women. A similar imbalance can be seen in the percentage of total investment that they hoped to cover with grants, with men applying for 68.2% and women for 59.7%.

The differences between young and adult promoters are even clearer in the 21 projects promoted by young people. In these projects, the total investment was going to be just over 1 million euros with an average investment of over 51,000 €. Within this group of young entrepreneurs, it is interesting to note that young women promoted more projects than young men. This resulted in a larger overall investment, although there were differences between the sexes with women making an average investment of almost 49,000 euros, while for men it was almost 55,000 euros. Similarly, women applied for smaller grants as a percentage of the total investment with 58.0%, as compared to men with 59.1%.

Finally, most of the planned investment was in areas where population was increasing with 53.4% of the total, while the remaining 46.7% was in municipalities in which the population was in decline. In this latter group, most of the investment (29% of the total) was planned in areas with the smallest population losses. This indicates that only 18% of the total investment scheduled in the failed projects analysed here was to be invested in the municipalities that were suffering the worst levels of depopulation (Table 11).

3.3 The Reasons for Failure According to the Different Actors

3.3.1 According to the LAGs

The reasons put forward by the LAGs regarding the failure of these projects are very vague and generic, using categories that reveal little or nothing about the real reasons why the projects were not executed with LEADER funds. With this in mind, we will

Table 10 Time elapsed until an answer is received from the administration

Territory	Men						Women					
	Adult			Young			Adult			Young		
	> 1 year	< 1 year	n.d	> 1 year	< 1 year	n.d	> 1 year	< 1 year	n.d	> 1 year	< 1 year	n.d
Extreme depopulation	1	1				1						1
High depopulation		1		1	2		1			2		
Slight depopulation	1	3	2			1		2	1	1	1	2
Increase in population	1		1		1		1	1			1	1
High increase in population		2	4	1	1		1			4	1	4
Total	3	7	7	2	4	2	3	3	7	7	2	7

Table 11 Amounts they planned to invest

	Men			Women			Adults			Young people			Total		
	Total	Inv/Pro	Sub.%	Total	Inv/Pro	Sub.%	Total	Inv/Pro	Sub.%	Total	Inv/Pro	Sub.%	Total	Inv/Pro	Sub.%
1 ^a	293,128	97,709	75.9	3458	3458	58.3	69,391	34,695	80.1	227,195	113,598	74.3	296,586	74,146	75.7
2 ^a	142,570	35,643	51.0	130,564	32,641	49.3	185,978	46,494	52.4	87,157	21,789	45.3	273,134	34,142	50.2
3 ^a	521,196	74,457	54.7	407,373	58,196	66.1	738,694	82,077	58.2	189,875	37,975	65.6	928,569	66,326	59.7
4 ^a	493,651	164,550	88.1	178,600	44,650	54.8	476,734	119,184	97.8	195,517	65,172	34.0	672,251	96,036	79.3
5 ^a	599,148	74,894	63.8	438,895	43,890	58.8	664,112	60,374	62.1	373,932	53,419	61.0	1,038,044	57,669	61.7
Total	2,049,694	81,988	68.2	1,158,890	44,573	59.7	2,134,909	71,164	68.5	1,073,675	51,127	58.4	3,208,584	62,913	65.1

^a Territory: 1: Extreme depopulation; 2: High depopulation; 3: Slight depopulation; 4: Increase in population; 5: High increase in population

be analysing the data in this section very briefly and generically, before going on in the next section to explore the real reasons why the projects failed, as explained to us by the promoters themselves (Table 12).

The most popular reason in the projects promoted by men was “voluntary renouncement”. This was the official reason put forward in seven cases of which six were adults. This was followed by “voluntary withdrawal” with another six cases of which the majority were young promoters. This means that 13 of the 25 male promoters decided to abandon the LEADER programme, although why they decided to do so remains unclear. The other reasons given are mainly to do with not meeting deadlines or other requirements in the application process; in short and bearing in mind the very limited information provided in the files, these could be considered as administrative or bureaucratic reasons. It is interesting to note that except for two cases in which there are references to the LAG’s budgetary problems, economic problems are not explicitly cited by the LAG as a reason for failure. This is especially surprising given the fact that the programme was carried out during a period of severe economic crisis. Another surprising finding was that certain reasons were only attributed to young promoters such as “lack of motivation” or “closure of the file”.

In the case of female promoters, in addition to the four cases in which no information was provided, there is a much wider range of causes. This is manifested by the fact that voluntary renouncement only appears in six cases, mostly adults, and there are a further two situations of voluntary withdrawal also in adults. In total, considerably fewer than in men, although we should remember that both sexes are equally represented in our sample group of projects. A lack of documentation or the failure to comply with deadlines or requirements was the official reason in six cases, most of which were promoted by young women. Unlike those promoted by men, we found two facts that we consider worth highlighting. Firstly, an unusual reason for failure namely “withdrawal due to order from the Territorial Council”, which means that the applicant was expelled by the Territorial Council after signing a binding contract. Secondly, in one project presented by a woman promoter, the official reason for failure was its “economic unviability” while in another presented by a young woman, her project was rejected due to the LAG’s budgetary problems. The fact that this reason appears and in particular within this group of entrepreneurs is important because we believe that economic problems are probably a much more common reason for failure than officially stipulated, and they are “masked” under other names.

In territorial terms, it is difficult to observe any clear patterns linking the reason for failure and the different types of territory, although it is worth pointing out that in the municipalities in which the population was in decline, the most typical reasons for failure were not meeting the administrative and bureaucratic requirements, while in those with increasing population, voluntary renouncement, withdrawal, or exclusions were more frequent. This could be due to the fact that in more remote areas, the administrative procedure takes longer causing many promoters to give up. In other words, the difficult access and the distance from the LAG offices could make the people who live in the remoter areas more likely to succumb earlier to the weight

Table 12 Reasons for withdrawal according to the LAGs
Official reasons put forward by the LAGs (adapted)

Sex	Age	Reasons	Extreme depopulation	High depopulation	Slight depopulation	Increase in population	High increase in population	Total	
Men	Adult	Voluntary withdrawal					2	2	
		Lack of required documentation			1	1			2
		LAG budget allocation spent					1		1
		Breach of deadlines	1						1
		Breach of requirements			3				3
		Breach of grant contract			1				1
		Others	1						1
		Renouncement		1		1	1	3	6
		<i>Total Adult Men</i>	2	1	6	2	6	17	
		Young	Young	Voluntary withdrawal	1				2
Lack of motivation				1					1
LAG budget allocation spent					1				1
		Closure of file		1				1	

(continued)

Table 12 (continued)

		Official reasons put forward by the LAGs (adapted)							
Sex	Age	Reasons	Extreme depopulation	High depopulation	Slight depopulation	Increase in population	High increase in population	Total	
		Renouncement				1		1	
		<i>Total, Young Men</i>	1	3	1	1	2	8	
		Total Men	3	4	7	3	8	25	
Women	Adult	Order by the Territorial Council					1	1	
		Voluntary withdrawal				1	1	2	
		Lack of required documentation				1	1	2	
		Others		2				2	
		Renouncement		1	1			2	
		(left blank)			2			2	4
		<i>Total Adult Women</i>		3	3	3	2	5	13
		Opted for another grant						2	2
		Order by the Territorial Council						1	1
		Lack of required documentation		1		1		1	3

(continued)

Table 12 (continued)

Official reasons put forward by the LAGs (adapted)

Sex	Age	Reasons	Extreme depopulation	High depopulation	Slight depopulation	Increase in population	High increase in population	Total
		LAG budget allocation spent			1			1
		Breach of requirements			1			1
		Economically unviable				1		1
		Others		1			1	2
		Renoucement			1	1		2
		<i>Total Young Women</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>13</i>
	Total women		1	4	7	4	10	26
Total			4	8	14	7	18	51

of the bureaucratic process and abandon their project. For those in areas closer to the LAG offices, these obstacles are easier to overcome and the proposals advance further through the application procedure until for a variety of reasons, they also end up failing.

3.3.2 What the Promoters Said

The information provided by the promoters in the interviews is an essential source for finding out the real reasons for failure behind the vague, generic categories established by the LAGs, analysed above. However, an important question to bear in mind is that some of the projects about which we asked our interviewees were presented over a decade ago, which means that they were often unsure about the answers to the questions, although as the interview progressed, they gradually remembered information that they thought they had forgotten. Indeed, although some interviews were scheduled for a particular day and time, enabling the interviewees to consult their files, in other cases the interview was conducted directly during the initial telephone call made to request an interview, which meant that the interviewees did not have the necessary documentation that would help them remember. In these cases, more spontaneous opinions were elicited from the interviewees, who did not have time to prepare the answers.

The interviewees were identified on the basis of their sex, age and the type of territory in which they lived. They were also given their own individual reference number. The reasons for failure were grouped into various categories on the basis of what the promoter told us over the course of the entire interview, which on quite a few occasions did not necessarily coincide with the answer they gave to the specific question as to why the project failed:

- A. Poor work and a lack of confidence in the LAG and its technicians.
 - B. Lack of funds and the project not meeting the criteria for the lines of finance.
 - C. Economic problems preventing them from carrying out the project.
 - D. Work on the project had already started prior to signing the declaration that it had not begun.
 - E. Physical and psychological distance from the LAGs.
 - F. Juggling work and family responsibilities.
- A. Poor work and a lack of confidence in the LAG

Some of the interviewees were very critical of the work done by the LAGs and blamed them to a large extent for the failure of their projects. This opinion is based on the mistakes they think the LAGs made when processing their applications: *“They rejected my application for a grant. They processed it as Fishing when it should have been Agriculture. It was their mistake. I had a meeting with the person who awarded the grants and he told me that it had been a mistake on the part of the LAG”* (young woman, slight depopulation 16). In some cases, the applicants were given incorrect information about the procedural requirements or the eligibility of their projects

for the grants: *“So I bought some second-hand machinery and later I was at the CADE and the civil servants told me that they were eligible for the grants (...) and then 3 years later the Provincial Council tells me that they weren’t eligible and that I have to return the money. The programme turned out really badly for me. I was severely battered by the whole experience”* (young woman, high increase in population 22).

This leads to a lack of confidence in the LAGs: *“The whole grant thing is a con because it’s only for people who already have money or some important backer who is prepared to invest”* (young woman, high increase in population 22); or that the money has ended up somewhere else: when all the documentation had been presented and it was all correct. *“We don’t know whether that money went somewhere else. I don’t know, but I do know I didn’t receive anything, so I wrote to them withdrawing from the grant procedure”* (young woman, high increase in population 24); *“It turns out that I spoke to the technicians to apply for the LEADER grant and they began to ask me for loads of paperwork. I had to go to where they were so that they could see all my contacts, because they wanted all my contacts to be able to set up all the tourism at my expense”* (man, increase in population 23); or with other public institutions such as the Local Council: *“I filled in all the forms for the grants, except for the stamp from the Local Council. I don’t know why they wanted it. I had the stamp from the Health Department, from the Industry Department, from Customs, from the inspectors. The only thing the Council does is charge you and then sign on the dotted line”* (man, high increase in population 22); they even felt persecuted by other administrations because of the controls they impose: *“They didn’t give me enough time, I had the business open for one year I think, when they came and started hassling me. I just closed it down, because I wasn’t interested in paying fines and things like that, I got frightened and closed it down”* (young woman, increase in population 10).

In some cases, they accused them directly of acting in bad faith and even of criminal conduct: *“they only gave grants to their friends and to others that slipped them something under the table”* (young man, high depopulation 1); or they felt offended by the reason, incorrect, set out in their file as the cause of abandonment, something that led them to insult the technicians: *“I find it quite offensive that they put it down to a lack of motivation on my part. They should have put something else or explained the real facts of the case: we are lazy slackers and we decided to turn it down because they are “dead dogs””* (young man high depopulation 9).

All of the above results in a very negative opinion regarding the role of the LAGs and the administration in general in the whole LEADER grant application and award process.

B. Lack of funds and the project not meeting the criteria for the lines of finance

Various interviewees referred to the LAGs running out of money: *“yes, that was what happened, insufficient funds had been allocated to the LAG budget”* (young man, slight depopulation 17); *“The LAG ran out of funds”* (man, high increase in population 25); or that the particular line for which they applied had no funds left: *“I think, as the girl explained to me, that at that time all the resources were being invested in boosting*

investment in agriculture, in other words tractors, farm machinery and there was no more left" (man, high increase in population 14). This question is important because on many occasions these projects are left "in reserve" and when they are finally awarded the grant, the deadlines for spending the money are very near and this often becomes a determining factor in their decision to turn down the grant or withdraw from the process: *"The limited time you have to finish the project because you have to adapt to a series of conditions, you can't meet the deadlines and if you can't meet them, well you have to turn down the grant"* (man, high depopulation 6); *"when they told me that there were projects that had withdrawn and that funds were now available and they told me that they were going to approve mine, they gave me such a short period it would have been impossible to implement it, so I decided to turn it down"* (man, increasing population, 20). The very slow cumbersome procedure involved in obtaining LEADER funds is directly associated with long periods of waiting for an answer/for the award of a grant and short periods for actually executing the projects. From this point of view, a quicker response is essential, especially in projects for the modernization or expansion of a business that is already in operation, in which the proposed investment may be crucial for its survival.

C. Economic problems preventing them from carrying out the project

In most cases, in one way or another, the projects failed for economic reasons. Some of the interviewees spoke openly about their projects being unviable. They talked about having to put up all the money and only later receiving the grant and that they were unable to advance so much money: *"they gave us very little money and you have to put up all the money, because things are tight, and it's a sum of money that you have to invest first even though later they give you the grant"* (man, slight depopulation 3); *"Now I remember what happened, you had to put up all the money at the beginning. In other words, buy the things you needed and pay all the bills and then later you have to present the invoices and then they give you the grant. That's why I couldn't accept the award because I couldn't afford to make all the initial outlay"* (woman, slight depopulation 15); or they did not receive the necessary finance because the banks refused to give them a loan: *"what was missing was the money that the bank had to act as a guarantor for and they refused to guarantee it, that was what was missing"* (man, slight depopulation 7); there was also the question of having to pay costs, such as the rent on premises, until the project could begin: *"by that time I was already paying the rent and I was presenting loads of paperwork and one day I didn't have the form that they asked me for and I decided to drop out because I didn't want to pay any more rent without being able to start the building work"* (young woman, high increase in population 21).

On other occasions, the uncertainty arising from the economic crisis situation dented the hopes they had set on their project and their expectations for the near future: *"It was 2010 and there was a chance of some work and then the crisis in the construction business really hit and obviously I was encouraged in that they were going to give me the grant, but it came with a lot of obligations and uncertainty, let's put it like that. So, faced with that I thought it best to remain as I was"* (man, high increase in population 18); *"I had to present loads of paperwork and besides, with*

the crisis, the future was far from clear and that's why I decided to leave it" (woman, high depopulation 2).

Others considered the sum they were awarded as insufficient to start their business: "The collar was more expensive than the dog" (young man, extreme depopulation 10); "I applied for a grant but I started to do various things such as refitting the premises and when they gave me the grant they said that what I had done up till then didn't count; if they had informed me properly maybe I would have waited and the grant would have been worthwhile because I had to pay all that out of my own pocket" (young woman, high increase in population 26); "with the grants they gave us the business would not have been profitable especially in the situation of economic crisis that we were going through" (man, high increase in population 11). On many occasions, they received grants from other bodies involving larger amounts of money than those offered by LEADER. Most of these cases affected young people and women: "Oh yes, I turned down the grant because I had another larger one" (woman, high depopulation 4); "When I went to speak to them to tell them that I had been given other grants by the Natural Park, they said that if I hadn't said anything I could have had them both, but what I didn't want was for my name to appear on both lists of grants and for someone to say: Hey you, what you're doing is fraud. Now yes because I have children, but at that time I had support from my family and I was able to set up the business, I couldn't do it now; quite enough to be a self-employed woman with children. Difficult? Tell me about it! But I don't know what score to give (...). Difficulty. 5 I suppose, because it is complicated" (young woman, slight depopulation 8). This aspect, taking into account the groups affected and that they were planning to create a business, is clearly related with the need to find work, to create a job for oneself within a context in which unemployment was growing fast. In short, becoming entrepreneurs out of need.

Other interviewees offered reasons related with excessive levels of bureaucracy and slow processing of the applications. At first, these reasons could be interpreted as purely administrative, but when you listen to the whole interview, you notice that money questions are behind many of them, for example in the need to have three estimates before buying machinery, the fact that the invoices must include VAT, which makes the purchase of second-hand goods impossible, the fact that people providing services should have proper employment contracts amongst others. In short, more than just a problem with bureaucracy, which is very important to bear in mind, on many occasions they mask an attempt to save money amongst others by buying second-hand machinery or materials, or by resorting to cash-in-hand work, work by the entrepreneur him/herself or by people from their network of family and friends: "*the thing is that together with the project itself you have to attach all these extra bureaucratic things that they require of you, they demand a series of invoices for a sum of money (...) because of course you know that this is Andalusia and everything you can save by not paying VAT, well you save it, you know? and we must be clear here. So of course we included the armchair and we included the air conditioning units which weren't eligible*" (young man, high increase in population 21); "*because they asked me for so many things, sometimes they asked for three estimates for each thing I wanted to buy, (...) and it was a pain having to go, knowing what I wanted to*

buy, to have to go and ask for three estimates and it took a long time and in the end I gave up" (young woman, high increase in population 21).

D. Starting work on the project prior to signing the declaration that it had not begun

Starting work on the project prior to signing the declaration that it had not begun is quite a common reason for the failure of a project. The interviewees explained that this was principally due to the need to start implementing the planned investment without being able to wait forever for a reply from LEADER, who took a long time to process the application: *"It wasn't approved and that's it. I needed to buy it and I bought it. We presented the application for the grant because there was a chance and if we got it, we got it and if we didn't get it, then I had to go on with what I had because I needed it for my business"* (man, slight depopulation 16). On other occasions, the interviewees hinted at "communication" problems with the LAG technicians, as revealed in complaints such as: *"I didn't know"* or *"They didn't tell me"*; this does not rule out *"a lack of motivation"* on the part of applicants: *"We didn't meet the requirements and when she came, it was rejected because they told us we had started the investments too early"* (woman, increase in population 19); *"Look they told me that I had started the building work, when all they found in the clinic was a desk from Ikea, for which I had not presented the invoice because I'm not going to present an invoice for a desk, and a compressor that I had bought second hand. I had them stored at the clinic and they said that I had started the work and that the clinic had to be completely empty"* (young woman, high increase in population 23); *"It was a mistake due to a technicality let's say, a problem with the paperwork, when they went to inspect me, the machine was already there and then they asked me for some proforma invoices but by then I'd already bought it and that's why they rejected my application"* (woman, high increase in population 25); *"I withdrew. Yes, the truth is that I withdrew, because the date of purchase of the machinery, it was a tractor to be specific, was a few days before the date I presented the application, (...) The money had been allocated, my application had been approved and I was just a few days away from being paid, but then they told me that I would have to withdraw because if not I would be committing a crime of documentary misrepresentation"* (young man, increase in population 13).

E. Physical and psychological distance from the LAGs and their technicians

The references to *"coming and going"*, or *"going to where they were"*, amongst others are ways of expressing the sensation of distance between technicians and businesspeople, which are sometimes interpreted as a lack of information, as we saw in the previous section, and other times as a psychological aloofness in the form of a lack of empathy, strongly associated with excessive bureaucracy: *"Yes I was in Mollina and I had to hand in all the papers and they told me that I had to go back and ask for more papers and proforma invoices etc. etc. so as to see later which one had been chosen, and then for me to buy it; and I just accepted defeat because I had spent such a long time dithering about opening or not opening and in the end what I did was give up because I couldn't waste so many months on this"* (young

man, high increase in population 12); *“We turned down the grant because they put so many obstacles in our way, we had to present paperwork constantly”* (young woman, increase in population 24); *“We were tired there were so many requirements, so much bureaucracy and it was exhausting”* (a woman, slight population 11). And on quite a few occasions, they complained about the physical distance: *“I wasn’t sure about the investment and in addition we are very far away”* (woman, high depopulation 2); *“well I spoke to the technicians to ask for the LEADER grant and they began to ask me for lots of different forms and papers and I had to go where they are”* (man, increase in population 23), a distance which even in the proximity of metropolitan areas is interpreted negatively and considered damaging for small businesses in the retail sector: *“the people go to Granada to shop at the big hypermarkets and that is very damaging for small businesses like mine”*.

F. Juggling work and family responsibilities

The difficulties juggling family and work responsibilities is another reason put forward by various interviewees in response to the question regarding the real reason for withdrawal from these projects. In addition, when we analyse the answers regarding the obstacles they have had to overcome when setting up their business, the problems they have juggling family and work responsibilities appear in a prominent position in many other cases. This is an obstacle which in the vast majority of cases is mentioned by women and in just a few by men. Here are some examples. A young woman (high increase in population 23) told us that when she applied for the grant: *“No, not at that time, because as I say I was young and I did not have any family responsibilities. Now yes because I have children, but at that time I had support from my family and I was able to set up the business, I couldn’t do it now; “quite enough to be a self-employed woman with children. Difficult? Tell me about it! But I don’t know what score to give (...). Difficulty. 5 I suppose, because it is complicated (the maximum score that can be awarded) (woman, high increase in population 25); “Of course, there was also the question that I was a mother and I noticed what my children needed, so of course for me (...) it was a good way of juggling home and work”* (referring to her plan to set up a children’s entertainment business) (young woman, increase in population 10); *“Oh... a 5 it is a determining factor”* (woman, high increase in population 12); *“Of course, it is always difficult to combine your professional and family lives but (being self-employed) also has certain advantages because for example I have a daughter and if they call me from school with some problem, well I just pull the shutters down and I leave quickly and maybe if I worked for someone else, I couldn’t do that”* (young woman, extreme depopulation 5); *“The problems juggling family and work responsibilities are very important when it comes to setting up a business. They affect everything”* (woman, high depopulation 1). This fact again highlights that gender discrimination remains an important factor in the rural world and the fact that women are obliged to make family and working lives compatible ends up thwarting many of their business initiatives.

3.3.3 The Promoters' Opinions About the LAGs

The scores awarded to the LAGs were positive in the sense that they received an average of over 5 out of 10 (5.7 to be precise). However, this average value at a territorial level concealed very striking differences between the interviewees. For example, the work done by the LAGs obtained very poor marks from those in municipalities with extreme depopulation, where they received an average of 3 out of 10 (3 people gave them a fail grade and only 1 a pass). They were also marked down by those with a high increase in population with a 4.8 (8 gave them a fail grade and 9 gave them a pass). By contrast, the work of the LAGs received very high scores in municipalities with high and slight depopulation with average scores of 7.1 (only 1 fail grade) and 7.0 (only 2 fail grades), respectively. In the municipalities with increasing population, they received an average score of 5.

As regards sex, men were more critical of the LAGs than women with average scores of 5.2 and 6.1 respectively. The same pattern can be observed if we compare young people and adults. Young men gave the work done by the LAGs a fail grade, with an average score of 4.7, while young women gave them a 5.5, 1.4 points less than they were awarded by adult women (6.9). Finally, extreme scores, both positive and negative, are also very frequent. Seven people gave them 0 scores and five more gave them just 1 or 2. At the opposite end of the scale, there were five scores of 10 and six scores of 9. This meant that in total 21 interviewees gave the LAGs extreme scores at either end of the score range (Table 13).

Table 13 Opinion of the work done by the LAGs (on a scale of 0 to 10)

Territory	Men						Women						Total	
	Adult		Young		Total		Adult		Young		Total		No	Av. age
	No	Av. age	No	Av. age	No	Av. age	No	Av. age	No	Av. age	No	Av. age		
Extreme depopulation	2	1.0	1	7.0	3	3.0			1	3.0	1	3.0	4	3.0
High depopulation	1	9.0	3	5.0	4	6.0	3	8.0	1	10.0	4	8.7	8	7.1
Slight depopulation	6	7.8	1	8.0	7	7.9	3	6.3	4	6.0	7	6.1	14	7.0
Increase in population	2	5.5	1	4.0	3	5.0	2	7.5	2	2.5	4	5.0	7	5.0
High increase in population	6	4.0	2	2.0	8	3.5	5	6.3	5	5.8	10	6.0	18	4.8
Total	17	5.5	8	4.8	25	5.2	13	6.8	13	5.5	26	6.1	51	5.7

4 Conclusions

The first important conclusion of this study is that the information which appears in the official documents regarding the reasons why a project failed is severely lacking and leaves a lot to be desired. This is because the LAGs had to summarize a wide range of reasons in a very limited number of vague generic names, many of which masked the real reasons that caused the project to “fail” (not to be implemented with LEADER funds). This information deficit is important not only because it limits the scope of the work done by academic researchers, but also because it provides a serious handicap for the institutions and managers when trying to improve the implementation of LEADER. In a society in which success is the central goal for so many people, there is a tendency to overlook and undervalue failure and marginalize those who suffer it; in short, failure is made invisible (Alvarez-Sousa, 2019). However, together with the good practices applied in successful projects which can serve as a model for others to follow, an accurate understanding of the reasons that cause a project to fail can be a determining factor to improve and advance the implementation of programmes such as LEADER. It is therefore necessary for all the stakeholders involved to pay more attention to project failure and get a much better picture of the reasons that trigger it.

The second important conclusion is that the economic crisis situation during the 2007–2015 LEADER programming period was an important cause of the failure of these projects, so confirming our initial hypothesis. This is especially true in young entrepreneurs and in young women in particular, the group that faced the greatest obstacles when it came to setting up businesses (Cejudo García et al., 2021a, 2021b). It is important to bear in mind when we talk about economic reasons as determining factors in the non-implementation of a project with LEADER funds that this is not simply a question of having insufficient funds to carry out the project and that other dimensions must be explored. The clearest manifestation of this can be seen in the fact that other much larger grants can be obtained from other institutions. LEADER has a relatively small amount of funds at its disposal and *cannot* (?) compete with other institutions in terms of the speed with which the grants awarded are paid. This “forced” applicants to begin their projects which could not be put off any longer, especially when the aim was to create a job for the promoter himself or herself in a context in which finding a job and/or setting up a business was very difficult.

The third conclusion is related to the sensation of distance, either in terms of the distance or the time it takes to travel to LAG offices (Copus et al., 2020) or to deal with the large amounts of bureaucracy and paperwork or in terms of the LAG’s failure to understand their needs and a general lack of empathy. This separates promoters from the LAGs and their technicians and highlights once again that the LAGs have forgotten (perhaps inevitably because of the increasing amount of office work being piled up on their desks) their role as “visitors” or “dynamizers” that enables them to get closer to the inhabitants of these rural territories, encouraging them and helping them to set up businesses (Bosworth et al., 2016). This results in the promoters giving them much worse assessments than those recorded in other research studies (Navarro

et al., 2016) or in accusations of malpractice above all from young entrepreneurs; a very worrying aspect if we take into account the essential role that young people must play in rural development and the fight against depopulation (Escribano et al., 2023). This finding must be contextualized to the extent that the promoters we interviewed were all promoters who for whatever reason did not receive LEADER finance and may therefore have felt a certain degree of resentment towards the LAGs.

The fourth conclusion is that although our results do not allow us to claim that the reasons for project failure vary according to whether the population of the municipality is rising or falling, we have observed that the strongest criticisms of the work done by the LAG came from promoters in the areas with the most serious depopulation problems, which are also the most inland and peripheral territories, and the most physically and psychologically distant from the LAG offices and their technicians (Dijkstra et al., 2015). These are the groups that complain most about excessive paperwork, problems meeting requirements and deadlines and where according to the interviewees, there are most complaints about a lack of information as a reason for project failure. We also discovered that problems of this kind had absolutely nothing to do with the academic background of the applicants or even with the degree to which their professional/educational background was related with the business they were planning to start. Most LEADER promoters have university degrees and there is a very close match between their previous work experience and the business they are intending to set up (González et al., 2022). In the municipalities where population is increasing, which are mostly located in periurban areas or large market towns, a common reason for project failure was that all the funds allocated to the LAGs or to their particular lines of action had been spent. This is because these areas are economically more dynamic and have more experience with projects of this kind and therefore larger numbers of project applications.

The fifth conclusion is that young people and above all women are the groups most critical of LEADER and of the way the LAGs operate. They are also critical of the LAG technicians against whom they make quite severe accusations. These groups are also the ones who most often fall foul of the rule that work on the project must not begin before the legally stipulated time. This is because in these groups, the aim of most of the promoters is to create a job for themselves, which means they must get the project off the ground quickly (Cejudo García et al., 2020a, 2020b). For similar reasons, many of them end up carrying out their projects with funds from other public institutions, a finding that indicates that LEADER has become an increasingly “slow” and “cumbersome” tool, above all when it comes to responding to the needs of groups who require quick, effective answers. Likewise, LEADER’s very limited funds and their questionable share-out between the different groups of promoters, not to mention their very arguable territorial distribution (Cañete Pérez et al., 2018a, 2018b), place serious limits on its capacity to attract young people and women. It is therefore necessary for the institutions involved to rethink its design and implementation in a bid to resolve what is a clear Achilles heel of the LEADER approach. It is also important not to underestimate the enduring gender discrimination within rural society even though the situation has improved in some respects (Dirección General

de Desarrollo Rural, 2022). This makes it very difficult for women, and especially young women, to set up businesses in country areas (Porto Castro et al., 2022).

Finally, and as a logical consequence of the two previous conclusions, the direct impact of these failed projects on the struggle against depopulation is, by definition, limited. Firstly, because they are projects which were not implemented with LEADER funds and secondly because if they had been, the associated investments would have been located above all in areas in which the population is increasing. However, we believe that failed projects can offer valuable insights into the wide range of problems faced by entrepreneurs in rural areas. By exploring the reasons why these projects ultimately fail, as we have done here, important lessons can be learned which are highly relevant today. We now have a much clearer picture of what things must be improved to ensure that the enterprising spirit detected in these projects is allowed to thrive. The competent institutions must correct the mistakes that have been detected and allocate more funds to this initiative. This is the best way to continue fighting the depopulation of our rural areas in an attempt to reduce as far as possible the number of municipalities in which “*there is no sense in devoting effort and resources to repopulating [villages] that are already condemned to depopulation because of the law of the times in which they live*” (Moyano Estrada, 2020).

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Failed Projects Applied by Firms Under the LEADER Programme. An Analysis for Andalusia



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Abstract The LEADER approach adopts a bottom-up perspective in which different stakeholders (individuals, local organizations, public authorities, and firms) can participate and apply for projects in a rural context. Firms are key stakeholders when implementing local development strategies as their projects have a positive impact on growth and employment. The aim of this chapter is to examine the socio-economic factors influence the failure of those projects applied by firms under the period 2005–2017 in the Spanish region of Andalusia. First, we apply multivariate analysis to identify groups of operational areas of LAGs. Next, we examine the spatial distribution of these clusters across the Andalusian region as well as the distribution of failed projects across clusters. The results obtained reveal that the high failure rate of firms compared with other stakeholders can be explained, at least partially, by the existence of a poor productive structure and ageing, depopulation, and accessibility problems.

Keywords Firms · LEADER · Failure · Andalusia

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1 Introduction

The approach of strategies and tools aimed at fostering the economic and social development of peripheral and dysfunctional territories requires new perspectives reflecting their reality and circumstances. It is necessary to overcome the traditional concepts of “progress”, “growth” and, of course, of economic “development” by enriching and completing them and, at the same time, to provide tools for a critical review of current trends (Barroso González & Flores Ruiz, 2010; Habegger Lardoeyt & Mancila, 2019). The aim is something well-known by preexisting policies, plans, and programmes: to continue with the path taken using other means. Despite some achievements have been made, there is still a long way to go to meet the objectives of general revitalization, economic diversification, and social reactivation (Márquez Domínguez, 2013; Pont-Vidal, 2020). In other words, it is necessary to incorporate new perspectives and to consider social reorganization to improve the efficiency in the sustainable use of the existing territorial capital (i.e., innovation), and to introduce innovative practices that help to smartly articulate a new scenario of participation, transparency, and governance (Farinós Dasí, 2005; Márquez Domínguez, 2013; Moral Mayoral & Martínez Martínez, 2018). By taking into account all these dimensions and concepts, the practice of rural development brings us to a new interpretation of development that is no longer endogenous but neo-endogenous. This perspective is framed in a commitment to sustainability, and it is aimed at fostering the generation of opportunities in rural and peripheral areas, such as (Cebrián Abellán, 2003; Plaza Gutiérrez, 2006; Rodríguez Martínez, 2001; Torres Granadillo & Briones Mendoza, 2019).

Rural development, when has a neo-endogenous base, is anchored to the territory, i.e. the initiatives or processes need the territory and its qualities to be implemented in a sustainable way. At the same time, they maintain a high degree of involvement with daily life and are embedded in functional dynamics (Marsden & Smith, 2005; Van der Ploeg & Roep, 2003; Vázquez Barquero & Rodríguez Cohard, 2015). Rural development does not promote initiatives “despite” the territory and its qualities, but rather considers the needs and expectations of the people and gives them an organizational meaning. Therefore, thanks to its characteristics, it becomes a guarantee for the survival of the rural domain and for the idea of community, allowing increases in the standard of living and contributing to broader and more complex processes such as the fight against territorial imbalances or the spatial justice (Moltó Mantero & Hernández Hernández, 2004; Rofman & Villar, 2006; Vázquez Barquero & Rodríguez Cohard, 2015). Rural communities can, in this way, be integrated as dynamic actors with a particular territorial function and not being simple imitators at a different scale or suppliers of complementary services, in the flows of territorial development. This is possible through a sustainable use of endogenous resources which in most cases are non-transferable and cannot be relocated. At the end of this process, the redirection of preexisting negative dynamics will help to create new possibilities for a development better adapted to the environment and its demands (Cañete Pérez et al., 2018; Copus et al., 2020; Navarro Valverde et al., 2018).

From a European perspective, rural development is the second pillar of the European Common Agriculture Policy. Within this second pillar, the LEADER programme, at its different stages, has intervened by revitalizing and proposing formulas that channel this need for social transformation and revitalization of economic activity. It emphasizes business revitalization, giving a voice to historical minorities or scarcely represented social groups in entrepreneurship, generating new financing options and articulating institutional and bureaucratic mechanisms. The central actors in these tasks are Local Action Groups (LAGs), composed of stakeholders from all spheres: business, politics, education, and academia (Cejudo García et al., 2020). It is necessary to review the achievements and impacts of LEADER on rural territories bearing in mind the diversity and starting conditions of each area of influence of LAGs, examining both the number of interventions and their effects. Only by taking into account the degree of success or dysfunction of the different initiatives conducted within the programmes, it will be possible to build new approaches in the way in which development is expressed and the revitalization of rural territories occurs. This opens a new window for scientific knowledge, which synthesizes various dimensions or disciplines, allows for results that are closer to the reality of the territories, and enables a better understanding of dynamics and flows.

In brief, it is necessary to assess the economic dimension of its reality and the activation and diversification of its business structure. This will provide a base on which to build a systemic change in rural areas, especially in remote rural territories (Brezzi et al., 2011). Additionally, by giving prominence to the figure of the entrepreneur, a new icon of the necessary change, new possibilities on which to channel future ideas and projects can emerge, thereby confirming that other ways of life are possible in rural areas. In this new scheme of values focused on the entrepreneur, a demonstration effect can be produced that could help to mobilize the whole rural society, ideas, and values, leading to the development of local identities that support neo-endogenous territorial development. Improvements in management and procedures, transparency and, ultimately, a new way of governance promoted by the public institutions themselves will be complementary in this new framework (Neumeier, 2017).

From a socio-cultural point of view, dimensions such as governance are now brought to the forefront, especially when it comes to the implementation of new initiatives or to avoid conflicts and problems (Esparcia & Abbasi, 2020). Here, the role of institutions is essential, by promoting programmes that go beyond hierarchical design to be able to adapt to the horizontal dynamics on which development is carried out. The summation of specific initiatives, the accumulation of plans and programmes without dialogue with the agents and stakeholders that lead life at the local scale, reflects in the fact that initiatives planned with excellent intentions reveal ineffective and unable to transform the socio-economic reality.

Finally, turning to the political-administrative dimension, the one in which territorial policies allow the creation of a favourable local economic environment, it is necessary to pay attention to how the social and monetary automatisms generated by decades of excessive bureaucracy and confusion in the objectives pursued can jeopardize the LEADER programme and its objectives (Bosworth et al., 2016). The role

of institutions must be one that guarantees the continuity and efficiency of the model with protection and attention: a programme is useless without those who continue the work, follow-up on the initiatives, and comply with its sectoral framework. And here the range widens to include urban, land-use and planning, environmental, infrastructure, gender, associative, labour, etc., policies as they are directly or indirectly related to rural development. Once again, the study of the socio-economic characteristics of the system—in particular the productive system—is essential.

The aim of this chapter, which falls within the framework of studies critical to the deployment of rural development programmes, is to shed some light on the territorial patterns of failed business projects within the LEADER programme in the region of Andalusia over the programming period 2007–2015. The notions of territorial diversity and economic dynamics find their most genuine and applied manifestation in this proposal. Likewise, it offers an analytical perspective on the effectiveness of financing and public policies from a business point of view and incorporates the territorial dimension. We focus on those projects applied by firms that, in spite of having been applied, finally were not implemented. Our approach can be summarized in the following research questions: What is the distribution of failed projects across stakeholders? Which socio-economic characteristics of the operational areas of LAGs can have an influence on the rate of failure of the projects applied by firms? Is there a spatial pattern in the distribution of the operational areas of LAGs? Addressing these issues will contribute to a greater efficiency and success in the future implementation of rural development programmes.

2 Data and Methodology

As was mentioned above, in this chapter we examine those failed LEADER projects applied by firms in the rural areas of Andalusia over the programming period 2007–2015. The data were provided by the Department of Agriculture, Fishing and Rural Development of the Regional Government of Andalusia. A total of 12,580 applications were examined. The category of firms comprises different legal forms: public limited companies (SA), limited companies (SL), labour limited liability companies (SLL), and cooperative societies. The rest of applicants, from individual entrepreneurs to the third sector or the public sector, were classified as “others”.

Table 1 gives the distribution of total and failed projects distinguishing two main types of applicants: firms and others. Projects are measured both in number and in investment applied. The table also reports the share of failed projects and of failed investment as well as the average investment per failed project.

As can be seen in Table 1, firms are applied for a total of 3523 projects over the period 2007–2015. These projects were quite ambitious: despite the projects led by firms were less than one third of the total number of projects, the investment in this type of projects accounted for more than half of the total investment applied. Out of the projects applied by firms, 54% failed, a percentage substantially higher than the average for the rest of applicants (51%). In terms of investment differences were

Table 1 Distribution of failed projects by applicant

Applicant	Total projects		Failed projects		% Failed projects	% Failed investment	Average investment per failed project
	Number	Investment	Number	Investment			
Firms	3523	715,304,896	1915	426,834,453	54.36	59.67	222,890
Others	9331	638,857,205	4714	337,287,735	50.52	52.80	71,550
Total	12,854	1,354,162,101	6629	764,122,188	51.57	56.43	115,270

even superior: almost 60% of total investment applied by firms failed, compared with 53% of the investment applied by the rest of stakeholders. We have to note that failed projects applied by firms were big: on average, the applied investment per failed project was 222,890 euros, three times higher than the average investment applied by other stakeholders in failed projects.

Obviously, in addition to the characteristics of each project and of the applicant, there are different factors that influence the success of a proposed project. Among these factors we can highlight the main features of the socio-economic environment or the efficiency in the development and implementation of local development strategies. As was noted, local development strategies are implemented and managed by LAGs. LAGs are responsible for designing and implementing strategies, building the capacity of local actors or prepare and publish calls or receiving and assessing applications. The common basic requirements and specific provisions for LAGs are set in the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) EU No 1305/2013 Articles 32–34 and in the Rural Development Regulation EU No 1305/2013 Articles 42–44. Overall, LAGs comprise both public and private individuals and organizations. The operational area of an LAG is sub-regional and does not have to follow administrative borders. In the case of Andalusia, in 2015 there were 52 LAGs which represented 51% of total population and 93.5% of total surface.

Differences in the characteristics of the operational areas of LAGs can explain, at least in part, the success (or failure) of the proposed projects. For instance, some operational areas of LAGs are close to capital cities and/or urban areas whereas others are remote areas. Some have a high degree of specialization, whereas in others the productive structure is weak. In certain areas the development of information and communication technologies (ICT) is high whereas in others it's low. In addition, in some LAGs population is growing whereas others are experiencing depopulation problems. It is quite reasonable to assume that those firms located in areas well-connected to capital cities and/or urban areas, with a developed productive structure, with a good ICT infrastructure, and with a growing population will be more likely to succeed when applying for a project than those located in remote areas, with a low level of ICT infrastructure, with a poor productive structure, and suffering depopulation and/or ageing. Starting from this idea, in our analysis we select different variables that summarize the main socio-economic characteristics of the operational

area of each LAG, namely, population dynamics, accessibility, performance of the productive system and digitalization. These variables are described in Table 2.

Regarding population dynamics, we include three variables aimed at capturing the two main problems faced by rural areas: ageing and depopulation. Ageing is measured by the dependency rate (the population aged over 64 divided by the population aged between 16 and 64 years). To capture depopulation, we compute the resident population growth rate both from a short-term perspective (period 2000–2015) and from a long-term perspective (period 1960–2015) and change the signs of the rates obtained.

In the case of accessibility, we employ two complementary indicators of distance: the average travel time to the capital of the province and the average travel time to the closest urban centre. Urban centres are municipalities not belonging to the operational area of an LAG. They are defined following the criteria established by the European Commission (European Commission, 2019). Average travel times were estimated by using Google Maps Distance Matrices (Svennerberg, 2010; Wang & Xu, 2011).

Concerning the performance of the productive system, we take into consideration the degree of concentration and of specialization, the firm density, and the importance of industrial activities. Thus, for one part, we compute the Hirschman-Herfindahl concentration (HHI) index and a local specialization index. As it is known, a higher HHI index denotes a high degree of concentration of employment. To obtain it, we use affiliation data by activity branch. In order to assess local specialization we employ shift-share analysis (Arcelus, 1984; Cuadrado-Roura & Maroto-Sánchez,

Table 2 Socio-economic variables analyzed

Variable	Description
Ageing	Dependency rate (population aged over 64 divided by population aged 16–64 years)
Short-term depopulation	Short-term population growth (annual average growth rate of total population over the period 2000–2015) with a negative sign
Long-term depopulation	Long-term population growth (annual average growth rate of total population over the period 1996–2015) with a negative sign
Distance to capital	Average travel time to the capital of the province
Distance to urban area	Average travel time to the closest urban area
Concentration index	Hirschman-Herfindahl concentration index
Local specialization index	Local specialization effect from shift-share analysis
Land for industrial use	Percentage of land for industrial use
Number of firms	Total number of firms
Medium-size firms	Total number of firms with more than 50 employees
Establishments	Number of establishments per 1,000 inhabitants
4G coverage	Percentage of 4G coverage
Broadband coverage	Percentage of broadband coverage

2012; Esteban-Marquillas, 1972; Mayor Fernández et al., 2005; Nazara & Hewings, 2004; Rodríguez Molina et al., 2020). This methodology decomposes the total change in a certain variable (in our case affiliated persons by activity branch) into three components: national effect, sectorial effect, and local specialization effect. This latter effect captures the competitive advantages (or disadvantages) that have an influence on the relative growth rate of a given area, i.e. it proxies local specialization. We measure firm density by using three indicators, namely the total number of firms, the total number of firms with more than 50 employees, and the number of establishments per 1,000 inhabitants. These three variables are provided by the Central Business Register of the National Institute of Statistics (Barbado Miguel, 2009). The importance of industrial activities is proxied by the percentage of land for industrial use published by the Cadastre.

Finally, digitalization is measured by using two indicators of connectivity, the percentage of 4G coverage and the percentage of broadband coverage, published by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Digital Transformation.

To examine the potential relationship between the socio-economic characteristics of the operational area of a given LAG and the failed projects applied by firms, we employ two types of multivariate techniques: factor analysis and cluster analysis (Afifi et al., 2012).

Factor analysis is a technique for data reduction that obtains linear combinations of the variables analyzed called factor loadings. As a first step, we assess the suitability of data by conducting two tests that check the assumption that the starting variables are correlated: the Kaiser-Meyer-Ohlin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and the Bartlett's test of sphericity. Next, principal components analysis is used to extract the factors. Once obtained, to facilitate interpretation, the factors are rotated. There are two main types of rotation: orthogonal and oblique. Overall, orthogonal factor rotations are easier to interpret than oblique ones. In particular, the varimax rotation introduced by Kaiser (1974) is applied to minimize the number of variables with higher loadings on each factor.

After obtaining factors, cluster analysis is performed. Cluster analysis is aimed at finding groups that share some characteristics by using different algorithms. One of the most widely used types of cluster analysis is k-means clustering. This type of cluster analysis finds k nonoverlapping groups represented by their centroids, which is the mean of points in each cluster. The groups are created using an iterative process in which each observation is assigned to the group whose mean is the closest. The process ends when no observations change groups.

The multivariate techniques described allow us to identify "socio-economic profiles" of operational areas of LAGs, as they classify them into homogenous groups which are not predefined but based on factors. Once these groups are obtained, we examine the distribution of failed projects among them and analyze their spatial location. This way it is possible to assess whether the "unsuccessful" groups of operational areas of LAGs share some common socio-economic features. We also use maps to analyze the distribution of the operational areas of LAGs across the Andalusian region.

3 Results

Table 3 reports factor loadings. As can be noticed, the value of the KMO statistic and the significance of the Bartlett's test of sphericity confirm the adequacy of factor analysis. After performing factorization on the 13 variables described, we retained three factors. We applied the orthogonal varimax rotation to the loadings to facilitate interpretation. As can be seen, the three factors obtained explain 74% of total variance. The first factor, which captures 39% of total variance, loads positively on those variables related to firm density and digitalization. It represents the existence of a strong firm density and a wide digital access. The second factor accounts for 23% of total variance. It summarizes the two major population problems faced by remote areas (ageing and depopulation) and low accessibility. Finally, the third factor, which represents 13% of total variance, reflects the degree of specialization of the productive system.

Table 3 Principal components analysis: factor loadings

	F1 High firm density and digitalization	F2 Ageing, depopulation, and low accessibility	F3 Highly specialized productive systems
Medium-size firms	0.92	-0.17	0.04
Establishments	0.92	-0.17	0.19
Number of firms	0.88	-0.14	0.21
Land for industrial use	0.77	-0.15	-0.15
Broadband coverage	0.71	-0.22	0.14
4G coverage	0.67	-0.15	-0.02
Long-term depopulation	-0.59	0.58	-0.31
Distance to urban area	-0.09	0.93	0.12
Distance to capital	-0.13	0.92	0.11
Ageing	-0.58	0.64	-0.08
Short-term depopulation	-0.50	0.58	-0.21
Local specialization index	-0.06	0.10	0.88
Concentration index	0.20	-0.04	0.77
Variance (%)	38.6	22.8	12.8
Bartlett's test	Chi-square	625.15	
	Sig.	0.000	
KMO test	Overall MSA	0.742	

Note KMO Kaiser-Meyer-Ohlin, MSA measure of sampling adequacy

Using the three factors obtained, we perform a hierarchical cluster analysis. The number of clusters was chosen on the basis on their interpretability and on the fact that increasing the number of clusters would not much improve the power of the classification. Table 4 reports the mean factor scores of each cluster and Fig. 1 shows the location of the operational areas of the LAGs included within each cluster.

Table 4 gives that the number of LAGs differs across clusters. The first cluster is the smallest, with only nine operational areas of LAGs. This cluster comprises areas with highly specialized productive systems. In this cluster firm density is high and there are no problems of ageing, depopulation, or accessibility. The second cluster comprises a total of 15 operational areas of LAGs. It covers areas suffering ageing and depopulation and with a low accessibility to capital and urban areas.

Additionally, firm density and digitalization are low. Cluster 3 contains 13 operational areas of LAGs. In these areas the number of firms is high, but the degree of specialization is low. Again, these areas do not have population or accessibility problems. Finally, cluster 4 covers a total of 15 operational areas of LAGs. These areas are highly dynamic from a population point of view and have a good accessibility, but the number of firms is low.

Turning to the location of LAGs, Fig. 1 shows the distribution of the four groups of operational areas of LAGs across the Andalusian region. The first cluster comprises the LAGs of Vega-Sierra Elvira, Costa Noreste de Cádiz, Medio Guadalquivir, Litoral de la Janda, Levante Almeriense, Axarquía, Antequera, and Los Alcornocales y Campiña de Jerez. These LAGs are located close to big towns like Jerez de la Frontera, Antequera, Albolote or Peligros, and close to coastal and touristic towns like Vélez Málaga, Chiclana de la Frontera, or Conil de la Frontera. In addition to having a

Table 4 Cluster description: mean factor scores

	C1 Areas with highly specialized productive systems	C2 Ageing and depopulated areas with low accessibility	C3 Areas with non-specialized productive systems	F4 Dynamic areas with weak productive systems
F1. High firm density and digitalization	1.05	-0.51	0.82	-0.75
F2. Ageing, depopulation, and low accessibility	-0.37	1.05	-0.00	-0.89
F3. Highly specialized productive structure	1.36	0.07	-1.09	-0.02
Number of LAGs areas	9	15	13	15

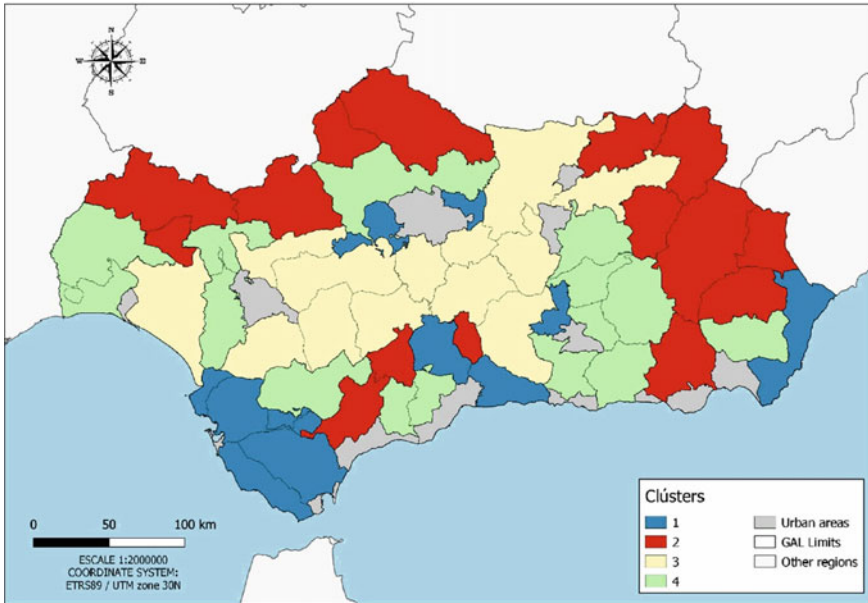


Fig. 1 Location of clusters across the Andalusian region

high firm density and good broadband coverage, many of these areas have highly specialized productive systems, mainly in the agro-industrial and the tourist sectors.

In contrast, cluster 2 comprises the most remote operational areas of LAGs, like Almanzora, Alpujarra-Sierra Nevada Almeriense, and Los Vélez in the province of Almería; Valle de Los Pedroches and Valle del Alto Guadiato in Córdoba; Altiplano in Granada, or the mining areas of Riotinto and Sierra de Aracena and Picos de Aroche in the province of Huelva. In the province of Jaén the operational areas of LAGs included within these clusters are Condado de Jaén, Sierra de Cazorla, and Sierra de Segura. In Málaga we find the mountainous areas of Guadalteba, Serranía de Ronda, and Territorio Nororiental de Málaga. Finally, Sierra Morena Sevillana is also included within this cluster. All these areas suffer depopulation and ageing problems, and the number of firms is small. Additionally, given the mountainous nature of most of them, accessibility is low.

Cluster 3 shows a quite high number of firms, but these are not specialized. This cluster is mainly composed of areas close to the Guadalquivir River. It covers areas in Córdoba, like Campiña Sur de Córdoba, Guadajoz-Campiña Este de Córdoba, as well as the Subbética Cordobesa. It also includes its neighbouring areas of Poniente Granadino and some areas in Jaén like Loma and Las Villas, Sierra Sur de Jaén, or Campiña Norte de Jaén. The province of Sevilla has an important presence in this cluster: the areas of Bajo Guadalquivir, Campiña and los Alcores de Sevilla, Estepa-Sierra Sur de Sevilla, Serranía Suroeste Sevillana, and the Gran Vega de

Sevilla are included within this cluster. In the mouth of river Guadalquivir, we find the operational area of the LAG of Condado de Huelva.

Finally, we have to highlight that the operational areas belonging to cluster 4 are less concentrated across space than the rest of clusters. In many cases, these operational areas are close to capitals and intermediate towns, like Filabres-Alhambilla, close to the capital of Almería, Sierra de Cádiz, close to Jerez de la Frontera, Sierra Morena Cordobesa, close to the capital of Córdoba, Alpujarra-Sierra Nevada, close to the capital of Granada, Valle de Lecrín-Temple and Costa Interior close to Motril, the metropolitan area of Granada in the case of Arco Noreste de la Vega de Granada, and close to Guadix in the case of Los Montes de Granada. In the province of Huelva, we find the operational areas of the LAGs of Andévalo Occidental and Costa Occidental de Huelva. In Jaén we find Sierra Mágina. The LAGs of Sierra de las Nieves and Valle del Guadalhorce close to the capital of Málaga are also included within this cluster. Finally, we find two neighbouring operational areas of LAGs near to the capital of Sevilla, Aljarafe-Doñana and Corredor de la Plata. One of the main advantages in the cluster is the good accessibility, thanks to their proximity to transport infrastructures. This helps to explain, at least in part, why these areas are highly dynamic in terms of population.

After classifying the operational areas of the LAGs, we examine the distribution of failed projects across clusters in order to identify the potential characteristics that influence the failure of those projects applied by firms. Table 5 gives the failed projects by cluster, in terms of number and of investment.

As expected, cluster 1 gives the lowest percentage of failed projects, both in terms of the total number of projects and of the total investment applied by firms. Thus, less than 50% of the projects applied by firms failed. The percentage of failed investment was also around 50%. In contrast, cluster 2 was the cluster with the highest percentages of failures: almost 60% of the projects applied by firms failed, which translated into a failed investment close to 64%. Thus, we can infer that population dynamics and accessibility is a barrier for the success of projects applied by firms.

Another key element is the performance of the productive system and the degree of specialization. Nonetheless, there is a difference between those areas with developed productive systems in terms of number of firms, but where there are no clear specialization patterns (cluster 3) those areas are with low firm density (cluster 4 or cluster 2). Thus, despite the percentage of failed projects applied by firms was more than 6 percentage points higher in cluster 3 than in cluster 4, the percentage of failed investment was substantially superior in cluster 4 than in cluster 3 (62% compared with 58%). In other words, the degree of development of the productive systems, even if we measure it in a very simple way as the number of firms, influences failure when applying for investment.

Turning to the average investment per failed project, we can note how it is much higher in cluster 4 or cluster 2 compared with cluster 1 or cluster 3. In other words, the highest is the average investment applied, the highest is failure rate. We can also note that population dynamics and, especially, accessibility, plays a moderating role in failure rates. Thus, despite both cluster 2 and cluster 4 have a low firm density, failure rates are higher in cluster 2, that suffers ageing, depopulation, and accessibility

Table 5 Distribution of failed projects by cluster

Applicant	Total projects		Failed projects		% Failed projects	% Failed investment	Average investment per failed project
	Number	Investment	Number	Investment			
<i>Cluster 1. Areas with highly specialized productive systems</i>							
Firms	576	100,214,653	286	50,480,905	49.65	50.37	176,507
Others	1,392	86,354,823	710	42,814,457	51.01	49.58	60,302
Total	1,968	186,569,476	996	93,295,361	50.61	50.01	93,670
<i>Cluster 2. Ageing and depopulated areas with low accessibility</i>							
Firms	959	200,989,572	573	127,820,813	59.75	63.60	223,073
Others	2,770	200,574,804	1,359	109,396,178	49.06	54.54	80,498
Total	3,729	401,564,377	1,932	237,216,991	51.81	59.07	122,783
<i>Cluster 3. Areas with non-specialized productive systems</i>							
Firms	1,047	212,514,112	587	123,998,861	56.06	58.35	211,242
Others	2,472	158,362,122	1,275	80,965,106	51.58	51.13	63,502
Total	3,519	370,876,234	1,862	204,963,967	52.91	55.26	110,077
<i>Cluster 4. Dynamic areas with weak productive systems</i>							
Firms	941	201,586,558	469	124,533,874	49.84	61.78	265,531
Others	2,697	193,565,455	1,370	104,111,995	50.80	53.79	75,994
Total	3,638	395,152,013	1,839	228,645,869	50.55	57.86	124,332

problems, than in cluster 4, where population is growing and there is good access to transport infrastructure.

4 Conclusions

The LEADER programme has played and still plays an important role in the development of rural areas. Different stakeholders can apply for projects under this programme, but firms tend to lead the big size ones. Thus, despite firms accounted for less than one third of the total projects applied over the period 2007–2015, the investment applied by firms was more than half of the total investment applied. In successful projects, almost half of the investment was made by firms. However, failure was very high in project applications: on average, more than 51% of projects and more than 56% of the investment applied failed. The percentages were even superior in the case of those projects applied by firms: 54% of the projects and 60% of the investment. The aim of this chapter was to shed some light on the reasons behind these high failure rates. In particular, we tried to identify which socio-economic factors of the territory influence failure. For doing so, first we applied factor analysis in order to summarize different socio-economic variables. Next, we used cluster

analysis to obtain different groups of operational areas of LAGs and examined their spatial distribution across the Andalusian region. Finally, we analyzed the distribution of failed projects applied by firms across clusters. The results obtained show the existence of a key impact of the degree of development of the productive systems on failure: firms located in areas with a scarce number of firms were more likely to fail when applying for projects. Specialization also exerted a correcting effect on failure; overall, firms located in areas with a high specialization show lower failure rates. In contrast, depopulation, ageing, and poor accessibility were higher in those areas with a high failure rate. From a spatial perspective, as expected, firms located in remote and suffering ageing and depopulation were more likely to fail compared with their counterparts with good accessibility to urban areas and/or growing population.

These findings confirm that socio-economic conditions are key when explaining failure. In order to reduce failure, it is necessary to combine the LEADER programme with other policy actions aimed at improving the socio-economic conditions of less developed territories.

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A Failed Project is Not Necessarily a Non-executed Project. LEADER Projects in Rural Development and Depopulation in Andalusia



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and Francisco Antonio Navarro-Valverde 

Abstract Recent analysis of failed projects under the LEADER approach has opened up a very interesting line of research on the practice of rural development, in that it covers not only the positive aspects of LEADER, the projects that it finances, but also the failed projects, i.e. those which for whatever reason failed in their application for LEADER funding. However, the fact that certain kinds of projects do not receive support from LEADER, and are rejected or withdrawn after beginning the grant application process, does not mean that they are not carried out. In fact, the opposite is often true. In this chapter, we will be looking at the failed projects that are eventually carried out with other sources of finance, be they public or private. It is impossible to quantify the number of projects in this situation solely by consulting official statistics. It is also difficult to know whether it applies equally to all kinds of projects (creation, improvement, expansion), all kinds of promoters (limited company or PLC, cooperative, self-employed, etc.) or all kinds of rural areas (deep rural, intermediate rural and periurban). This type of information can only be gauged from personalized interviews, where we can discover the real reasons for rejection by the LEADER initiative, the type of finance used, the real role played by LEADER in rural development through the creation of businesses and a final, very important aspect, namely the opinion of the LEADER approach of those who did not benefit from it.

Keywords Failed projects · Executed projects · Andalusia · Rural development · The LEADER approach

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1 Introduction/Current State of the Question

The analysis and evaluation of the social and economic impact of the LEADER initiative is a very widespread line of research, both in Spain (Alario & Baraja, 2006; Cañete et al., 2020; Cañete Pérez, Navarro Valverde, et al., 2018a, 2018b; Delgado & Fuente, 2000; Esparcia et al., 2015; Esparcia Pérez et al., 2000; Gordo Gómez, 2011; Laguna & Lasanta Martínez, 2007; Nieto Masot & Cárdenas Alonso, 2015) and in numerous other European countries (Bosworth et al., 2016; Cejudo & Labianca, 2017; Furmankiewicz et al., 2010; Lacquement, 2016; Lukić & Obad, 2016; Papadopoulou et al., 2011; Woods & McDonagh, 2011). It is therefore based on sound methodological principles which are widely accepted by the scientific community.

These studies have approached this issue from very varied angles, focusing for example on the social capital generated (Nardone et al., 2010; Shortall, 2008), its innovative capacity (Dargan & Shucksmith, 2008; Labianca et al., 2016; Navarro-Valverde et al., 2022), its effects in terms of the economic dynamization of the territories in which the project is carried out (Dax & Fischer, 2018) or the role played by public/private partnerships in neo-endogenous development (Shucksmith, 2000).

The benefits of this programme (Ray, 2000; Shucksmith, 2000) have been made clear in most of the reference studies although as the successive programming periods have come to an end, there has been increasing criticisms of the perverse effects that LEADER sometimes has on the territory, in that it exacerbates precisely what it is trying to remedy, i.e. territorial imbalances in rural areas (Cañete Pérez, Navarro Valverde, et al., 2018a, 2018b; Navarro et al., 2016).

A common feature of all these research studies is that they are based on an analysis of the projects that were implemented with LEADER funding, often referred to as “executed projects”, and that the scale of analysis is normally regional or at most municipal.

In the autonomous region of Andalusia, however, researchers have been given access to regional government databases in which they can analyze individual grant applications, so reaching what could be described as “project” level. This has enabled a qualitative leap in research (Cañete Pérez et al., 2017) covering the period 2000–2015.

This main line of research at “project” level centred initially on executed projects. However, it later gave rise to another quite novel approach focusing on the other side of the coin, “failed projects”. The first results of this approach with statistical analyses can be consulted in studies of failed projects in Andalusia (Cañete Pérez, Cejudo García, et al., 2018a, 2018b; Cejudo García et al., 2020).

Although it is true that a better, more detailed knowledge of failed LEADER projects and why they went wrong gives us a better understanding of the problems involved in the practical application of this programme, the research we have conducted shows only slight differences in behaviour according to the type of promoter (businessperson, self-employed, association, etc.), gender (women, men),

age (young people, adults) and the type of “failed activity”. And what is most important, if LEADER finance was a determining factor in whether or not the project was eventually carried out.

The analysis of the projects that was successfully executed within the LEADER programme enables us to get a better picture of the investments made in the territory and the types of projects. But, what about the “failed projects”, i.e. those projects that were not financed by LEADER even though an application had been made? How many of them were carried out with some other form of public finance or with the promoter’s own funds? This particular group of projects could be referred to as “failed LEADER projects that were later executed”. In this chapter, we will be exploring the reasons why these projects were not carried out within the LEADER funding framework even though they were clearly viable, as demonstrated by the fact that they were eventually carried out, and often successfully, as many are still operational today.

In essence, what we are assessing here is the role of LEADER in rural development and in particular in Andalusia, the study area for this research.

Although LEADER is just a small part of the funding put into rural areas through the CAP (Larrubia Vargas, 2017), it is important because of the new rural development philosophy on which it is based, with management structures that combine both public and private, highly visible partnerships between territorial actors. The successes or failures of these partnerships should also be regarded as successes and failures of a particular intervention model in rural development.

Our initial hypothesis is that at present LEADER is not playing an important role in rural development in Andalusia because the requirements for receiving a grant make it difficult for smaller promoters such as self-employed people or limited companies to access its resources. As a result, many of the rejected projects are in fact viable and are eventually carried out with other sources of finance.

2 Methodology, Sources and Study Area

2.1 Study Area

The study area for the current research is the autonomous region of Andalusia in southern Spain during the 2007–2013(+2) LEADER programming period. This period was selected because the data for the 2014–2020 period are not yet available due to the delay between the official end of the period and the actual period of implementation, which is normally two years longer.

From a geographical point of view, the LEADER programme acts in a total of 719 municipalities in Andalusia or 91.5% of the total.

Andalusia is the second-largest region in Spain (behind Castilla y León), with an area of 87,598 km² or 17% of the entire country (Cañete Pérez, Navarro Valverde, et al., 2018a, 2018b). However, it comes first in terms of population with 8,472,107

inhabitants in 2021. Its territorial structure is primarily rural and it has certain characteristics that differentiate it from the other Spanish regions, such as the network of medium-sized towns, which act as sub-regional capitals and providers of supra-municipal services with some degree of business fabric (Expost Report on the 2007–13 Andalucía Rural Development Programme). Although this has not prevented the loss of population over recent years, it has prevented depopulation in Andalusia from reaching the same levels as in other Spanish regions.

2.2 Sources

Our analysis of the failed LEADER projects that were later executed with another source of finance is based on the same database used in research on successful projects. We consulted this database to obtain the basic information identifying the promoters, the name of the project, the amount involved and the official reasons for withdrawal, among other questions.

This “project level” database was provided by the Directorate-General for Sustainable Development of the Department of Agriculture, Fishing and Rural Development of the Regional Government of Andalusia, which enables us to break down the information at municipality and LAG level.

On the basis of this information, we selected the promoters who we were going to interview.

The statistical information used in certain specific cases comes from the Andalusia Multi Territorial Information System (SIMA) and the cartographic databases in vector format from the Andalusia Institute of Statistics and Cartography. The maps were made with the ARCGIS 10.8. application.

2.3 Methodology

The territorial reality of Andalusia is so complex and diverse that any approach to fieldwork is affected by the huge size of the study area and the limitations on the research in terms of time and available budget. Striking a balance between the different types of rural areas, provinces and the diverse range of promoters has not been easy. There is also the added difficulty of contacting project promoters who applied for LEADER funds on average 10 years ago (period 2007–15) using the very basic information provided by the grant application file—often incomplete as regards addresses and telephone numbers—with the possibility that the company has disappeared or changed its address.

The reliability of the information provided by the promoters we interviewed is also relative, in that they answered our questions from memory without consulting any documents and were not always very cooperative, perhaps feeling that they were wasting their time.

As mentioned above, our objective is to identify and analyze those projects which, while being registered as “failed” or non-executed projects in the official LEADER databases, were in fact carried out, either using the promoters’ own funds or by applying for other kinds of public support. This information is not normally available and can only be obtained through interviews carried out during fieldwork.

It is therefore of great interest to know more about the type of failed project, the official reasons why it was not carried out and the final source of finance that enabled them to implement it. We also wanted to ascertain whether the promoters later applied for other LEADER grants and lastly their opinion about the LEADER approach as a line of finance.

2.3.1 The Questionnaire and the Interviews

The methodology applied had several stages:

We began by deciding how best to distribute the interviews so as to obtain a balanced selection of different types of rural areas (Cejudo García et al., 2022), of municipalities in each province and of the different types of promoters.

The second stage involved the drawing up of the questionnaire and the guide for interviewers. The questionnaire was divided into the following thematic blocks of questions: promoter details; project details; reasons for not obtaining the grant, personal obstacles and those arising from the degree of rurality; knowledge/opinion of LEADER; and impact of the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

Thirdly, the model for the questionnaire was tested in the field and the errors were corrected.

In Stage 4, the general model for the questionnaire was drawn up and adapted to the specific characteristics of the different types of promoters. The resulting questionnaires had at least 32 questions.

In Stage 5, we located the promoters’ contact telephone numbers by consulting the grant application files, the Internet, the LAGs and the town councils.

Stage 6 involved carrying out telephone interviews (these began in 2021 during the pandemic when mobility was still quite limited and were completed in July 2022).

In Stage 7, we transcribed the recordings of the interviews.

And finally, in Stage 8, the information gained from their answers was summarized in table form.

2.3.2 Distribution of the Interviews According to Types of Rural Area and Types of Promoters

A total of 109 interviews were conducted. The following table gives their distribution within the eight provinces of Andalusia and by type of rural area (Table 1).

We also analyzed the distribution of the interviews according to the type of promoter, as set out in Table 2.

Table 1 Interviews with promoters of failed projects by province and type of rural area

	Periurban rural	Intermediate rural	Deep rural	Total
Almería	0	5	6	11
Cádiz	5	5	1	11
Córdoba	2	4	2	8
Granada	7	5	11	23
Huelva	4	2	3	9
Jaén	4	3	7	14
Málaga	5	6	5	16
Sevilla	9	7	1	17
TOTAL	36	37	36	109

Source Drawn up by the authors

Table 2 Interviews with promoters of failed projects by type of promoter and type of rural area

	Periurban rural	Intermediate rural	Deep rural	Total
Self-employed men	8	8	9	25
Self-employed women	9	9	8	26
Limited company	4	7	5	16
PLC	2	2	2	6
Cooperative	5	4	4	13
Women's association	-	2	2	4
Disabled associations	2	2	1	5
Cultural associations	2	2	2	6
Town councils	2	1	3	6
Church/others	2			2
Total	36	37	36	109

Source The authors

A significant statistic to bear in mind is that of the 109 interviews with the promoters of failed projects, 78 (or 71%) projects were later executed with an alternative source of finance other than LEADER, and should in fact be regarded as projects that were executed in one way or another.

It is true that these values are influenced to some extent by the limitations inherent in the selection of the sample group, in that we were only able to contact those promoters whose business/activity was still in operation or groups whose corporate/social function has survived over time. The spatial distribution is clearly visible in Fig. 1.

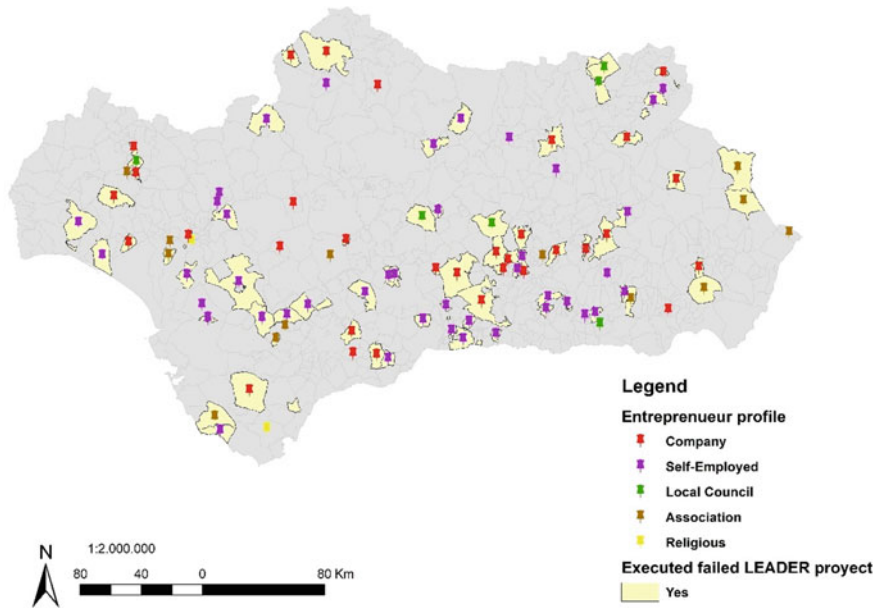


Fig. 1 Spatial distribution of the interviews with promoters of failed LEADER projects, 2007–15. *Source* The authors

3 Results

During the 2007–13 (+2) programming period, a total of 12,855 applications were processed by the LAGs. Of these, 6,225 were executed, while the rest (6,630 or 51.57% of the total) embarked on the grant application procedure but for various different reasons their projects were rejected or withdrawn and therefore were not executed. We refer to these projects as “failed LEADER projects”.

The analysis by type of promoter highlights, as can be seen in Table 3 that self-employed promoters presented the highest percentage of failed projects, 2,106 (31.8% of the total), followed by limited companies with 1,603 failed projects (24.2%) and local councils, 1,240 (18.7%). In other words, it is the smallest businesses with the weakest structures (self-employed people and limited companies) that are most affected (Navarro Valverde et al., 2020, 2021).

The official data sources, however, offer no clues as to which projects were carried out even though they did not obtain LEADER funding. To find this out, we had to do fieldwork in the form of interviews with the promoters of failed projects. Given the huge number of such projects (6,630), obtaining a statistically representative sample group for interview was out of the question.

Table 3 Failed LEADER projects by promoters. Andalucía 2007–15

Promoters	Absolute N°	% of total
PLC	96	1.4
Limited company	1,603	24.2
Small partnership	89	1.3
Cooperatives	230	3.5
Associations	153	2.3
Local action groups (rural development groups)	140	2.1
Other associations, foundations and societies	651	9.8
Local councils	1,240	18.7
Other local and provincial institutions	85	1.3
Self-employed people	2,106	31.8
Other public bodies	30	0.5
Other bodies and institutions	207	3.1
Total general	6,630	

Source Regional Government of Andalusia. The authors

3.1 Interviews with Promoters of Failed LEADER Projects that Were Executed with Non-LEADER Finance—Analysis by Type of Promoter

3.1.1 PLCs

Of all the different types of promoters, PLCs have one of the lowest project failure rates, with 94 projects. This represents 0.74% of all the projects presented in the 2007–15 programming period and 1.4% of all the failed projects.

We conducted a total of six interviews. Of these, five projects (83%) were executed and just one was not executed. This project involved the construction of a firewall and the total planned investment was just 9,210 euros.

As regards the five executed projects, these had quite varied objectives such as the construction of a hotel, the purchase of equipment and machinery or the updating of company facilities. The total planned investments were for significant amounts, in one case as high as 360,000 euros.

3.1.2 Limited Companies

Although as can be seen in Table 3, Limited Companies were the promoters with the second-highest number of failed projects (24.2%), the results of the interviews showed a very high degree of execution of these projects, in that of the 15 cases analyzed, 12 (80%) were carried out. The objectives of these projects included the

creation of new businesses (3), and the modernization (5) or expansion (4) of company premises. It is easy to see why a project for the modernization or expansion of an existing business facility might go ahead without LEADER finance, but when the objective of the application was the setting up of a new business, the fact that many of these businesses remain in operation suggests that the rejected projects were well-prepared and financially solvent.

The investments in these projects oscillated between 26,500 and 550,000 euros with a very varied range of activities such as, for example the manufacture of bouncy castles, a winery or a riding school (creation).

The three projects that were not executed involved the creation of a new business, the expansion of another and the purchase of machinery. These projects were proposed in the three different types of rural area, i.e. deep, intermediate and periurban.

To this group we should also add the interview we conducted with a Worker-Owned Limited Company (*Sociedad Limitada Laboral*). Their project, which involved the construction of some new premises, was executed although not with LEADER funds.

3.1.3 Cooperatives

3.5% of the failed projects during this period were presented by cooperatives. These came to 1.8% of all those presented. A total of 13 interviews were held, in nine of which (69%) the interviewees made clear that their projects had eventually been carried out. Most of these projects (7 of the 9) were carried out by olive oil presses with the aim of modernizing their premises, while 2 involved setting up a new business (a jewellery workshop and a go-kart track). The investments they involved varied greatly between 26,000 and 600,000 euros.

The four projects that were not executed with either LEADER or some other source of funding involved the modernization or expansion of the cooperative's premises. However, according to those concerned, all these cooperatives remain in business today.

3.1.4 Self-Employed

The self-employed are the group with the highest percentage of failed projects, in that 31.8% of the failed projects were presented by self-employed people (16.3% of all the projects presented). They are also the group with the greatest difficulties in terms of access to credit or prior training in the skills required to tackle the complex administrative process involved in obtaining a grant for a project. Self-employed people also find it difficult when setting up a new business to adapt to the timetables involved in LEADER grant applications, with procedures that often involve delays of over a year, especially given that an essential precondition for receiving the grant is that work cannot begin until the application has been approved.

They were also the most widely represented group in our interviews with 51 out of a total of 109.

Unlike the other cases, the results of the interviews with self-employed people can lead to confusion or to rushed, perhaps erroneous, conclusions, in that as individual promoters it has been particularly difficult to make contact with them. This is probably why 44 of the 51 interviews (86%) were with businesspeople whose failed projects were eventually executed and most of whom remain in business today.

Of the 44 failed projects that were eventually carried out, 19 were carried out by men (7 of whom were young men) and 25 by women (13 by young women). Another significant figure is the high proportion of projects involving the creation of new businesses (26 out of 44 or almost 60%), with a substantial number of projects led by women (16), most of whom were young (11).

Although it is true that the statistical data resulting from this set of interviews cannot be extrapolated to the group as a whole, it does seem to confirm the increasing influence of women in the rural development of Andalusia and in the maintenance of the economic structure of many rural areas, as has been suggested in other recent research (Cejudo-García et al., 2021).

More balanced values between the sexes can be found in projects aimed at the expansion of current premises (2 men and 2 women) or modernization (7 men and 7 women). In both cases most of the projects were carried out by adults and therefore by companies that already existed.

The projects applied for varied enormously in terms of budget with minimums of just 3,500 euros up to over 400,000 euros in the case of a country restaurant.

Seven projects covered in the interviews were never executed. Of these, six were presented by men and just one by a woman. All these projects were presented by adults, whose proposals involved both the creation of new businesses (two of which were not created) and the expansion (two of which remain in business today) or modernization of existing ones (three of which are still in business). Apart from the first two, these projects involved attempts to improve the business (purchase of a vehicle, improvement in a rural hotel and craft workshop and purchase of agricultural machinery) and the fact that they were not executed did not put the economic viability of the business at risk.

3.1.5 Local Councils

There are many clear examples of local council projects that were not approved by LEADER and were executed, thanks to other sources of finance. Out of a total of seven interviews, in six cases the project was later carried out and in just one it was not. A substantial percentage (18.7%) of all the failed projects were presented by local councils.

Most of these projects were related to the refurbishment and improvement of the towns for which they applied to various different government projects in search of finance. When this is not obtained, bank loans are not normally an alternative given

that most local councils are not permitted to take on high levels of debt. The result is that the projects are not executed.

There were various reasons for rejection by LEADER: not complying with deadlines, not presenting the correct documents and even not being entitled to finance. It is possible that the requirements would be less strict when applying for other lines of public finance.

The amount of the projects applied for and finally executed ranged between 13,680 euros and 297,000 euros.

3.1.6 Associations

Although in terms of overall investment, the role of associations in rural development does not reach the levels of limited companies or self-employed people (Cejudo-García et al., 2021), their importance is undeniable as an example of the contribution made by what is known as the social economy (Mozas & Bernal, 2006), as is the impact of their projects on certain groups in society such as disabled or dependent people.

As these associations are non-profit-making organizations, they can receive public finance for projects promoted by groups such as cultural associations, women's associations or patient/disabled groups, which would otherwise be difficult to obtain.

In the study period analyzed here, 2007–13 (+2), associations were responsible for just over 2% of the failed LEADER projects.

We carried out a total of 15 interviews with representatives of associations, as a result of which we discovered that nine projects had eventually been carried out. These had varied objectives ranging from the publication of a catalogue, the organization of a conference, the improvement of a residential home for disabled people, the opening of a museum or the expansion of a gymnastics club.

The budgets for these projects ranged between 2,000 and 96,724 euros. The reasons for rejection by LEADER were that the project did not meet all the requirements or that work on the project had started already.

In regard with the non-executed projects, it is important to make clear that the associations that we interviewed remain in operation today and that the projects were not executed because of the lack of the necessary bank finance to accompany the money obtained from LEADER (a project to improve the energy efficiency of a day centre for disabled people) or simply because it was not eligible for funding within the LEADER programme.

3.1.7 Religious Organizations

The finance by LEADER of projects promoted by religious orders has been aimed above all at preserving heritage buildings (Cejudo et al., 2022). During our fieldwork we conducted two interviews in relation with projects promoted by the Catholic Church.

In both cases, the projects never got off the ground due to a lack of finance and not finding any alternative funding to LEADER. Both initiatives were construction projects. The first involved the construction of a country chapel and the second of a parish hall.

3.2 Failed Projects that Were Later Executed with Non-LEADER Finance. Territorial Impact. Case Study

Looking beyond the overall figures presented in the previous section, the use of case studies offers a clear insight into the problems faced by promoters who have applied for LEADER finance and been rejected, but were later able to carry out their projects without LEADER funds. For this purpose, we have made a case study for each one of the main types of promoters.

3.2.1 Case 1: Limited Company (Granada)

This project was presented to LEADER in 2011 and its objective was “the construction of a winery for the making of wine” in a municipality in a deep rural area. For these purposes, the promoters set up a limited company, and had some non-professional experience in the winery sector. The planned investment was 540,000 euros. In the official databases, it stated that it was not awarded the grant because of “breach of the requirements”. However, in the interview they made clear that they had later carried out the project with funds from a different source, namely the Department of Agriculture, although the grant was smaller than that applied for from LEADER and in this case it was approved:

“[The Department of] Agriculture were more serious, they paid in just a few months”. “The Development Group took years to pay the money”. “It’s a disgrace, years to receive a grant”.

The objective of this first application to LEADER was to create a winery. Later in 2012 they applied for another grant to expand this activity to be able to open it to visitors and offer restaurant facilities. This application was also rejected.

The project was carried out, thanks to a grant from the Department of Agriculture of the Regional Government and also due to the fact that they had their own funds and finance from the bank. The winery remains in business today.

As regards, their assessment of the contribution made by the project to the territory, they gave the maximum score (5 points) to its impact in terms of economic diversification, increase in wealth, job creation, innovation, participation of women (there are four partners, two of whom are women) and the enhancement of the value of endogenous resources. Lower scores were awarded for the participation of young people (not at all important) and helping maintain population levels (not very important).

When asked about the obstacles that stood in the way of setting up the project, they awarded the maximum score (5 points, very important) to the administrative and social obstacles, the lack of financial resources and the economic crisis at that time. They awarded the minimum score (1 point, not at all important) to competition, lack of motivation and geographical obstacles. The obstacles arising from a lack of knowledge of the sector were considered quite important.

They considered that the obstacles arising from rurality had made the implementation of the project more difficult, ranking as very important: depopulation, ageing of the population, distance from the capital, very limited transport infrastructure and poor Internet connections. The accessibility of the municipalities was also mentioned as an obstacle, albeit less important (3 points).

The support received for their projects from the LAG was given two points on a scale of 1–10.

Finally, they had quite a negative opinion of LEADER as a rural development programme, because of the time it took to pay the grants and the current guidelines. They mentioned the case of people they know who had gone bankrupt because they had not received the grant, stating that:

“Yes, the time it takes and I think they are concentrating more on supporting councils and big companies than small businesses” “They don’t listen to small projects”.

3.2.2 Case 2. Young Self-Employed Person (Seville)

This case study focuses on a project presented to LEADER in 2011 by a 26-year-old female university graduate. The purpose of the project was the creation of a dental clinic in the town where she lived. The reasons she gave for setting up the business was being tired of having to travel to the other municipalities in which she worked. She planned to make an investment of just over 24,000 euros with a grant of about 12,000 euros. Her town was situated near Seville, so that it fell within the category of periurban rural areas and sub-regional capitals, the most dynamic rural areas in economic and social terms.

According to information from the official database, this project was not carried out due to a decision by the territorial council that it should be withdrawn. However, the promoter made clear that when the technicians came to visit her premises, they saw a cardboard box with table and chairs together with a compressor, on which basis in the relevant report they claimed that business activity had already been started, the reason put forward for rejecting the grant.

Fortunately, she was able to carry out the project, thanks to finance received from her parents and friends, and the clinic was still in operation at the time of the interview, with four employees.

In this case, as in others, when enforcing the rule of not financing projects that have already started, if the LAG managers find they are doing a few preliminary jobs for the refitting of premises or that they have purchased the machinery or furniture necessary for their business, they tend to view it as a business that is already in operation. In no way can these preliminary jobs be understood as the business having started. Once

someone takes the risk of embarking on a project, they cannot be expected to wait for the decision to be made on their application for a LEADER grant, before beginning the first jobs such as searching for premises, locating the necessary machinery or tools, etc.

As regards the contribution that the project makes to the territory, the promoter we interviewed gave the maximum score (5 points, very important) to job creation, as it has created four jobs, the participation of women (three of these are women), the participation of young people (all four of them are young) and halting depopulation in the area—they are all residents in the same or nearby municipalities. Lower scores were awarded to other aspects such as economic diversification or wealth.

As regards the possible obstacles arising from the degree of rurality, none of these aspects were considered of great importance, given that the town is near the city of Seville.

Finally, when asked about her opinion of LEADER as a rural development initiative, she described it as very negative, as they did not make her work as a businesswoman any easier, and she received absolutely no support from the LAG. She gave it a score of 1 out of 10 and said that she would not apply for another grant because of the “*paperwork involved*”.

3.2.3 Case 3. Local Council (Huelva)

In this case study, we focus on a project presented by the local council of a village belonging to the Cuenca Minera LAG in a deep rural part of the province of Huelva. This village had a population of just over 700 inhabitants and therefore had very limited financial resources and few technical staff.

Their projects sought to improve the quality of life of their inhabitants and in the words of the council representatives:

“offer people services similar to those provided by a town”.

The search for subsidies from different sources is a constant feature of local council work. In fact, the failed project discussed in the interview, which was presented in 2012 and whose objective was the “refurbishment and equipment of a Municipal Park” with a budget of 43,531 euros, was one of many projects it has presented to the LEADER programme in recent years. These other projects focused on improvements in municipal services. During the interview, he referred to one project for which they applied for a grant in 2018 and did not receive approval until 2021.

According to the official database of the Regional Government of Andalusia, this LEADER project was rejected due to a lack of the required documents. The representative of the council was unaware of the real cause as he had not been a councillor at the time, but he did not rule this out given that:

“These grants are very hard to get and if you make the slightest mistake, you have to return the grant”.

“They turn it down for any technical flaw”.

“Any tiny mistake in the work, and you have to return the money”.

In the end, the project was carried out using other funds. During the interview, the council representative offered his opinions about LEADER and about the work done by the LAGs. These opinions can be extended to the rest of councils who apply for these funds. In particular, he gave the support received from the LAG a score of 10 out of 10 and insisted:

“They are very keen for us to carry out projects”. “They always give us maximum support”.

And as regards the delays in the grant decision in a recent project, he said:

“We’ve been waiting for three years and it’s not the fault of the LAG, of the technicians, because they are very helpful to us”.

As regards his opinion of LEADER as a rural development programme, he gave it a “B+” but made clear that:

“They are very strict and if you make the slightest mistake, they turn down the grant, which makes the application process extremely stressful”.

When asked about what he would change in LEADER, he stressed:

“They shouldn’t be so fussy” “they are too strict” and “less time waiting for a decision”.

3.2.4 Case 4. Association (Cádiz)

In this case study of a failed project presented by an association that was later carried out, the project was presented by a women’s association in an intermediate rural area. The objective was “the setting up of a catering service”, which would supply the schools in the area and provide a home delivery service for elderly people. The project was presented in 2010 with an initial planned investment of just over 19,000 euros.

According to the official database of the Regional Government of Andalusia, this project was rejected because of a breach of requirements.

The association already managed a number of nursery schools for which they were now obliged to provide catering services. They were also aware of an increasing need to provide meals to elderly people. To cover this demand, instead of engaging an external catering service, which would have had to come from a distant town, they thought it would be a good idea for the association to provide this service itself by setting up a catering service.

In our interview, they explained that the LAG rejected the project because it was considered ineligible for finance due to a legal interpretation about the way the service was to be provided.

In the end, the project was carried out in two phases. Initially, they “borrowed” the kitchen in a primary school when it was not being used, and later one of the councils in the area loaned them some premises where they were able to continue preparing the meals. The catering service remains in operation today in this area.

The role of associations as a dynamizing force in rural areas and the erroneous vision that the public administration has of them are clearly visible in the words of the person we interviewed:

“One thing that is very clear that they don’t take into account in Europe is that in these rural areas, women’s associations are dynamizing agents, that we get involved in economic projects, we create employment, we create services and then they treat us just like any normal business, which means you have to advance the money and the percentage covered by the grant doesn’t take anything into consideration either and we are not normal companies, we are non-profit organizations”.

“There’s a weakness there”.

“It’s important to bear in mind that different rural areas have different characteristics”.

Due to their own experience, they had a highly negative opinion regarding the support received from the LAG, however their opinion of the LEADER approach in general was around average with a score of 6 out of 10.

“That’s something that must be improved because they don’t take many aspects of the real situation of the territories into account, but the idea is good and the grants always come in handy”.

She made clear that they had never received a grant, only a prize for “Excellence in Innovation by Rural Women” of 18,000 euros.

In spite of not receiving LEADER finance, she said they had not given up hope of doing so within the current framework.

When asked about the contributions made by the association to the territory, the person being interviewed gave a maximum score (5 points) to the contribution they make towards maintaining population levels, and job creation, especially for women, highlighting that the incorporation of young people into the project was a task that was still outstanding.

When asked about obstacles, she emphasized the administrative and social ones. Regarding the latter, she said that sometimes little attention was paid to their projects because they were presented by women. As regards of rurality and the difficulty this imposes on the work of the association, she highlighted the ageing population and the shortcomings in infrastructure and other facilities as the most significant obstacles.

3.2.5 Case 5. Cooperative (Málaga).

The purpose of the cooperative was the pressing of olives. In 2013, they presented an improvement project to the LAG with a planned investment of 26,000 euros for the “*Installation of a hopper for storage of the residue*”. The municipality is located in a deep rural area and the project application was correctly completed and presented, thanks to the technicians from the LAG and the technician from the cooperative itself. However, it did not receive a grant because the funds available to the LAG had run out.

This situation occurs all too frequently as can be seen from our fieldwork. The LAGs admit that they process projects with a sum total that exceeds their financial capacity. Their aim here is to have projects “in reserve” that can replace those that may fall by the wayside for a variety of reasons. Many of these projects are “granted” to public bodies such as local councils or even the LAG itself, but in some cases they are also given to associations or cooperatives, as in this case. In spite of this, the interviewee had quite a good opinion of both the work done by the LAG and of the LEADER approach in general. This was probably due to the fact that they had previously received LEADER grants for other projects and intended to continue applying for further grants in subsequent programming periods.

The cooperative eventually managed to carry out the project, thanks to a subsidy from the Department of Agriculture of the Regional Government of Andalusia.

LEADER has provided support for part of the modernization carried out by the network of cooperatives in Andalusia in recent years and when the projects have not received its support, as in this case, they have been carried out with finance from the Department of Agriculture. On this question, the women we interviewed remarked that:

“In this area, many cooperatives in the province of Málaga have received LEADER grants”.

The cooperative we spoke to has around 420 members and 6 employees. In recent years it has had a turnover of over 3,000,000 euros.

When asked to assess the obstacles faced by the cooperative, they highlighted above all the bureaucratic and administrative hurdles (5 points, very important) and the prevailing economic situation (4 points, important). Other obstacles such as the availability of economic resources, competition from other businesses or the lack of knowledge were not considered relevant.

As regards the contribution made by the cooperative to the municipality, they emphasized as “very important” the contribution to economic diversification, the increase in the wealth of the municipality and the innovative component. Its impact on job creation and in terms of the increased participation of women (the cooperative is chaired by a woman) and of young people was rated as “important”.

Finally, as regard of the effects of rurality, they considered depopulation and the ageing of the population as very important and to a lesser extent poor accessibility and shortcomings in infrastructure and services. The quality of the Internet connection however was not considered a significant problem.

4 Discussion and Conclusions

The detailed analysis of “failed LEADER projects” conducted here by means of interviews opens up interesting debates as to the real impact it has had on rural development over the course of recent years.

In addition to its very scarce funding in comparison with the CAP as a whole, which has limited its capacity for action in rural areas, the interviews with stakeholders whose proposals have been rejected (failed projects) reveal that some of them were finally carried out using other funding mechanisms or using the promoters' own funds, a fact that calls into question the effectiveness of the LEADER programme in rural areas of Andalusia.

Seen from this perspective, LEADER would be just one more of a series of funding programmes offered by the regional, national or European administrations to which these promoters could turn, but under no circumstances could it be viewed as a factor that determines whether or not the project is carried out. As a result, the projects financed by LEADER could be classified in the most part as well-developed, mature projects in terms of both those involving the creation of new initiatives and those involving the extension or improvement of existing ones.

What is more, this research shows that even in the projects that applied for the grant but did not obtain it, LEADER finance was not a determining factor, as most were eventually carried out by other means.

The fieldwork we performed, which went beyond the cold statistics of the databases to seek the personal opinions of the promoters of the projects, raises a number of questions such as: Is Andalusia a special case or can it be extrapolated to other Spanish regions? Or does the same thing occurs in other European countries where the LEADER initiative is implemented?

Unfortunately, there are few research studies that have carried out the detailed fieldwork required for this analysis, especially in the case of "failed projects".

The results we obtained seem to indicate that an accurate assessment of the impact of LEADER in the rural development of European regions depends, in addition to the analysis of successful projects (those executed), on a detailed review of failed projects without which it is impossible to get a real dimension of its effects. One could argue that the failed projects that are eventually carried out are also a failure of the LEADER approach, in that due to its particular conception it has been unable to accept mature and viable projects which have later been successfully carried out using other mechanisms.

This leads us to query once again (Cañete Pérez, Navarro Valverde, et al., 2018a, 2018b) the rigidity of the administrative procedure and its slowness, which makes many of the projects presented unviable in terms of the time taken to process them, especially when the procedure is followed very strictly.

In the interviews we carried out, there were numerous complaints from the interviewees that their project application had been turned down because LAG managers had found "two boxes with a table and a chair from Ikea" in an empty office, and claimed that this meant they had started the activities referred to in the application.

When a promoter decides to embark on a venture of this kind, they cannot be expected to sit around with their arms crossed, sometimes for a year or more, until they receive an answer.

Another important conclusion that can be drawn from these interviews is the crucial role played by bank finance in rural development. Banks are rarely prepared to finance projects by self-employed people especially if they are young. In this

case, having family members who are prepared to support a project, often the young person's parents, can provide an essential impulse to help the business to get off the ground.

Another interesting finding was the self-employed people's opinions about the LEADER programme and whether they would apply for this kind of grant again in the future. Most self-employed, both adults and young people, had very negative views of LEADER as "a waste of time" and most said that they would not apply again in the future. Very few of them felt that they had been supported by the LAGs during the processing of the documentation. They considered that the paperwork and the bureaucratic procedures are excessive. When an entrepreneur wants to set-up a business, the timescales within which LEADER operates have little to do with the real business world or with the businessperson's needs.

Small-business owners have similar views, especially those who own limited companies. They expressed very negative opinions about LEADER because of the time and money wasted in the preparation of the projects. After this experience they said they would prefer to apply for other funds that are easier to manage and are paid out more quickly.

However non-profit making associations, cooperatives and local councils often have quite different opinions, although they did not receive LEADER grants for the projects in question and had to carry them out with other funds. Their opinions about the LEADER programme as a mechanism for fomenting rural development are normally quite positive and they give it quite a high rating. The work done by the LAGs is quite a different matter. Opinions vary considerably, in that while cooperatives and local councils feel supported by the LAG, the associations feel that little attention is paid to them as promoters (especially if they are women). To this we should add the generalized strategy in the LAGs of processing more projects than they are actually capable of financing. Their aim here is to keep some projects "in reserve" in case any of the projects they have decided to finance fail for some reason and they cannot spend all the money assigned to them.

This strategy can lead to enormous frustration when a promoter successfully negotiates his/her way through the whole procedure only to be told that "the funds have run out".

Local councils, associations and cooperatives are used to periodically applying for a range of grants (of which LEADER is one) for the improvement, updating or refurbishment of their facilities. In other words, they have staff who carry out these formalities on a regular repeated basis and are aware of the documentation required, which facilitates the whole process. These applications for grants are sometimes approved and sometimes not, but they do not involve the beginning of a business activity, which is one less hurdle to cross. Not receiving finance for a particular project could produce initial frustration, but it would not prevent them from applying for other lines of public finance or even applying for LEADER grants again by presenting other projects in subsequent years.

As regards the obstacles that stand in the way of the successful execution of these projects, the most important cited by the interviewees were the excessive bureaucracy, the very slow processing times and financing difficulties. Most believe that their

projects, in which more and more women are taking part, have played an important role in the economic diversification of their municipalities.

As regards the obstacles arising from the degree of rurality, they highlighted the impact of an ageing population and depopulation as very important issues that threaten the viability of certain initiatives associated with the provision of private services in the municipalities. Although improvements in accessibility are always welcome, they are not regarded as an aspect that hampers the development of these projects according to the interviewees. Likewise, the quality of the Internet connection is not seen as a particularly problematic issue.

It is important to stress that the quantitative results obtained from the interviews have no statistical value, and that the primary objective was to ascertain the real reasons why the projects were rejected by LEADER and where the promoters later found the necessary financial resources to carry them out. Here lies one of the contradictions of LEADER. All too often, the rigidity of the process prevents the people or entities who really need them from accessing these funds. Self-employed people and limited companies who help dynamize the rural economy often have to resort to other sources of finance for projects that are economically viable.

The analysis of the “failed LEADER projects” that was later executed seems to confirm that in terms of investment, the LEADER programme is playing an increasingly less important role in the development of rural areas of Andalusia.

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Failed Third Sector Projects Within the Framework of the LEADER Approach in Andalusia, Spain (2007–2014): a Combination of Inexperience and a Failure to Adapt



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Abstract The LEADER programme has been a point of reference to help understand the current dynamics of rural Europe, for example in the fight against depopulation in certain areas. But not all the experiences have been positive. Many projects that were initially submitted later fell by the wayside for various reasons, even once processing of their grant applications had begun. This is what happened to many of the projects presented by third-sector entities, which have acquired an increasingly influential role in modern society. In this chapter, we analyse from a qualitative perspective the failed projects proposed by representatives of the third sector in the Spanish region of Andalusia during the 2007–2013 programming period, a particularly difficult time in recent Spanish history due to the economic crisis which began in 2008. The results point in two directions. Firstly, the programme did not adapt well to the organizations that make up the third sector, and secondly, some of the promoters lacked the necessary management experience to carry out their projects successfully.

Keywords LEADER · Andalusia · Associations · Rural environment

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1 Introduction

When it first appeared in 1991, the basic objective of what was then known as the LEADER initiative was to encourage the economic diversification of rural Europe given that in many areas, traditional farming activities were no longer able to sustain the population. After various modifications, the LEADER programme became a methodological approach, a way of thinking about and constructing the territory, which allowed it to promote rural development through bottom-up ideas (European Commission, 2018). Even though their decision-making capacity varies greatly, the Local Action Groups (or LAGs) have played and continue to play a vital role in the implementation of LEADER, not only as the bodies responsible for processing and managing the grants, but also, and this is very important, as forums for citizen participation in which different local stakeholders are represented (Cejudo-García et al., 2022).

In general, LEADER has proved an important point of reference for those wishing to understand the current dynamics of rural Europe in relation to basic aspects such as multi-level governance (Serrano Andrés et al., 2021), social and territorial innovation, citizen participation in decision-making, the empowerment of young people and women, economic diversification, the enhancement of the value of natural and cultural heritage, and last but not least the fight against depopulation, amongst many other aspects (Navarro-Valverde et al., 2022; Nieto Masot & Cárdenas Alonso, 2015). Although it has not always had positive outcomes, it is important to emphasize that its most enduring result is the thousands of projects that have been executed in the over 30 years since it was first launched.

During this period, a considerable amount of research has been done into the positive impacts of the programme. By contrast, however, we have come across few authors who have opted to study what we refer to as “failed projects”, i.e. those which in spite of having started the grant application process, were ultimately never carried out or if they were, it was without LEADER funding. Some authors have touched on this subject indirectly, by expressing either the fears of certain women in rural areas regarding the uncertainty inherent in entrepreneurship (Driga et al., 2009) or the control that certain groups have when it comes to obtaining and implementing LEADER projects (Dargan & Shucksmith, 2008). Others tackle this issue more directly by quantifying the number of projects, the types of promoters and the territories in which this happened for both the 2000–2006 (Cañete Pérez et al., 2018; Navarro et al., 2020; Navarro Valverde et al., 2018) and the 2007–2013 programming periods (Cejudo García et al., 2020, 2021). Indeed, rather than continuously focusing on success, accepted as the dominant social model, it is also important, as argued by Rodríguez et al. (2014), to understand failure, if we want to avoid offering distorted explanations of social action processes. This is why in this chapter we will be focusing on failure and in particular on the failure of third sector projects, a subject we will be exploring from a different qualitative perspective.

The third sector is made up of private organizations with a very diverse range of legal forms, which share the fact that they are non-profit-making entities (Bassi &

Fabbri, 2020). These organizations play an increasingly important role in today's society in that they provide basic services in relation to crucial aspects of our lives such as education, support for vulnerable groups or the protection of heritage assets, all of this without forgetting their contribution to job and wealth creation (Cejudo García et al., 2022). This has aroused suspicion in both the public and private sectors and frequent overlaps to the extent that the third sector meets needs which are not addressed either by the private sector due to market failings or because they are not considered profitable, or by the public sector due to the evident limitations of the welfare state in an economic context that is closely confined within openly neoliberal principles (Lam, 2020). It is also important to remember that the third sector can be very versatile and useful in exceptional situations, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Coram et al., 2021).

Non-profit-making organizations therefore play a basic role in the dynamization and participation of local people in development processes (Rantamäki & Kattilakoski, 2019) boosting the resilience of these territories and improving their governance (Esparcia & Abassi, 2020). In this way, they are helping bring about greater social and spatial justice in the rural areas of Europe (Shucksmith et al., 2021).

The objective of this chapter is to analyse from a quantitative perspective the failed experiences of some of the representatives of the third sector in the Andalusia region of Spain during the 2007–2013 programming period. This coincided with the prolonged economic crisis from 2008 onwards, which in the case of Spain resulted in a dramatic destruction of employment, and in particular of male employment due to excessive dependency on the construction sector (Gil Alonso & Vidal Coso, 2015). This was combined with the austerity policies instituted by the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, which were imposed on various southern European countries. The crisis also had an impact in demographic terms by exacerbating certain trends that were already in place, such as depopulation and ageing, especially in rural areas where the most depopulated municipalities proved the least resilient (Nieto Calmaestra & Capote Lama, 2020).

This chapter is divided into three parts. Firstly, we present the methodology we followed, involving a series of interviews in different places in Andalusia. The aim here is to illustrate the diversity of the third-sector entities in rural areas of Andalusia that decided to take part in the LEADER programme. Secondly, we analyse the factors that may have caused the failure of projects for which grant applications had been presented. Thirdly, we look at their general opinion of the LEADER programme, the role played by the LAGs and what became of their failed projects. The chapter finishes with some conclusions and reflections.

2 Methodology

In this research, we adopted a strongly qualitative approach. Although the questionnaire contained some closed questions, most of them were open-ended and our aim was to discover what the associations thought about their failed experiences with the LEADER programme in a particular project. It is important to make clear, as we will go on to see, that some of the associations later applied for new projects and in some cases had more positive experiences. For the failed projects being studied here, most of these associations applied for the grant in 2014 (9 out of 17). The others did so between 2010 and 2012.

As Cejudo et al. (2021) made clear, the projects applied for or carried out by non-profit-making associations within the LEADER programme show enormous diversity and territorial spread across the whole of the Andalusian countryside. In this research, although the sample group is quite small, we have tried to reflect this diversity. Our sample group is made up of associations spread across five of the eight provinces in Andalusia. Most are concentrated in three: Almería, Cádiz and Seville. We obtained reports from five associations in each of these three provinces and one each from the provinces of Huelva and Granada. Together they represent the diversity of rural areas of Andalusia: ranging from areas that are suffering from severe (2) or slight (3) depopulation, others that are proving more resilient in that their population is increasing, albeit modestly (3), and rural areas which are more dynamic in demographic terms (9). The fields in which these association operate are also very diverse and can be divided into four main types (Table 1): six can be classified as cultural associations, four are women's associations, five are associations for the integration of dependent people and lastly there are two religious organizations run by the Catholic Church.

The diversity of this third sector is also reflected in the ambitious breadth of its remit: we can find associations largely staffed by volunteers, which carry out small-scale projects, and other much larger ones which plug the gaps that should be covered by the public sector (Cejudo García et al., 2021). Along these lines, a useful indicator can be found in the budgets for the projects presented by the associations in the sample group. These can be divided into three groups: large-scale projects with budgets of over 100,000 euros (four associations); medium-sized projects with budgets of between 25,000 and 100,000 euros (four associations); and lastly, the largest group, small-scale projects with budgets of between 2,399 and 19,650 euros (nine associations).

The questions in the script for the interviews aimed to find out: the objectives of the projects presented by these associations, the reasons why they were rejected, and the relationship with the Local Action Groups and their opinions about the Leader programme. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed with the consent of the interviewees.

Table 1 Typological description of the associations in the sample group

Reference	Type rural area	Year of application	Province	Field
RP_AC1	Slight depopulation	2014	ALMERÍA	Cultural association
RP_AC2	Severe depopulation	2014	ALMERÍA	Cultural association
RP_AD1	Severe depopulation	2014	HUELVA	Dependent people's association
RP_ASOM1	High increase in population	2014	GRANADA	Women's association
RP_ASOM2	Slight depopulation	2014	CÁDIZ	Women's association
RI_AC1	High increase in population	2010	SEVILLA	Cultural association
RI_AC2	High increase in population	2011	CÁDIZ	Cultural association
RI_AD1	Increase in population	2014	ALMERÍA	Dependent people's association
RI_AD2	High increase in population	2011	ALMERÍA	Dependent people's association
RI_ASOM1	Increase in population	2010	CÁDIZ	Women's association
RI_ASOM2	High increase in population	2010	ALMERÍA	Women's association
PER_AC1	High increase in population	2014	SEVILLA	Cultural association
PER_AC2	Increase in population	2010	SEVILLA	Cultural association
PER_AD1	High increase in population	2012	SEVILLA	Dependent people's association
PER_AD2	Slight depopulation	2010	CÁDIZ	Dependent people's association
PER_REL1	High increase in population	2014	SEVILLA	Religious organization
PER_REL2	High increase in population	2014	CÁDIZ	Religious organization

3 Results of the Investigation: The Third Sector in Andalusia and the LEADER Programme

3.1 Objectives of the Projects

The vast majority of these associations had a shared objective when they were originally founded and later on when it came to implementing the projects that they applied to the LEADER programme for, namely to contribute in some way to the development of the municipality, either by providing a social service that was not available in that area or by enhancing the value of local heritage. In this way, we can distinguish two types of objectives in the rules or statutes of these associations: firstly, cultural objectives, especially in relation to the valorization of heritage and secondly, social objectives, providing some kind of social service for vulnerable groups in society or contributing to greater equality between men and women.

In the first group, there is a clear attempt to link heritage with the development of rural tourism in the area. By way of illustration, we could quote the opinions offered by an association from Osuna, a town in the province of Seville with over 17,000 inhabitants known for its historic, architectural and religious heritage. Despite this, and according to the people we interviewed, there has been insufficient promotion of the town and the surrounding area for tourism purposes:

“Our intention with all these projects was to contribute in some way to the development of the local area. We were the only tourism association for this area at that time and this is still the case today. Therefore, as the Rural Development Group had assigned just a small part to tourism ... well, we tried to include some of these things: we drafted marketing plans, we organized cooking courses, and courses for waiters on many occasions, we carried out a census of tourist resources in all the villages in the Campiña and the Sierra Sur...” (PER_AC2).

As regards the associations with social objectives, the first thing that springs to mind when one looks at their statutes is what they say in the introduction: the key role that certain associations can play in the provision of services which within a welfare state should really be provided by the public sector. As was stated earlier, the aim is to provide support and accompaniment to certain vulnerable sectors of the population, and in particular to two types: firstly, associations of families and friends, which aim to provide support and leisure activities to families with disabled members and secondly, women’s associations. One example of the first kind is an association from Cádiz which was set up in 1992 by a group of families in a town with a shrinking population:

“The Association was created by a group of parents of disabled children. As there were no resources of this kind in the area, they decided to set up this Association. The objective was to support the inclusion of disabled people, because in that area there were no leisure resources adapted to their needs” (PER_AD2).

As regards women’s associations, they have two main objectives: firstly, to help cover demands that are not catered for in the municipality, by creating mutual support

networks, and secondly to help create jobs for women. It is important to remember, as set out in the report entitled “Review of Gender Equality in Rural Areas 2021” (drawn up by the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture, Fishing and Food) (2021), the female employment rate in rural areas of Spain was noticeably lower than the rate for men. This was in spite of the fact that the difference between the two sexes (51.6 and 60.6%, respectively) had been reduced considerably since 2011, one of the reference years for this study, when this differential was over 20 percentage points. Creating jobs for women was one of the objectives of one of the women’s associations situated in one of the municipalities where population has been falling over the last 20 years:

“The priority objective is to foment female employment. With this in mind, over this period the association have set up cafés and home help services, in various different things, depending on the skills that people have to offer. We have about 200 members from all over the surrounding area” (RP_ASOM2).

3.2 Why Did the Projects Fail? Different Profiles and Different Reasons

Although there are various reasons why the projects did not receive grants, in many cases they are actually quite similar. The details provided by the Local Action Groups when they closed each file offer an imprecise, incomplete and even confusing picture, which rarely coincides with the first-hand accounts of the people who shared their experiences with us. This is why we were particularly interested in talking to the main actors in these projects in order to get as close as possible to their real experiences with the LEADER programme.

The reasons put forward by the different regional development groups at the end of the programming period are set out in Table 2. In spite of the fact that these data are not very precise, as mentioned earlier, they do give us some initial clues. One first point to highlight is that the most frequently repeated cause of failure was withdrawal by the promoter, although this information is limited by the fact that the reason why they withdrew is not specified. The rest, almost all, are put down to “economic difficulties”, either due to the promoter’s incapacity to make the necessary investment or because of the very limited funds available to the LAGs in the final stages of the programme. As we will go on to see in the first-hand accounts of those involved, the date on which the application is presented can be crucial. Another possible reason for withdrawal was because the project that they were trying to finance had already been started, so breaching the rules and requirements. It is important to make clear that the database only cites one reason for the failure of the project. This imposes additional constraints on information in that, as can be seen from the interviews, on some occasions there are various reasons for withdrawal.

The interviews with the promoters enabled us to broaden the information from the official database, clarifying in many cases the causes of failure set out in the

Table 2 Official reason for the withdrawal of projects presented by the associations in our sample group

Order	Structure	Official reason for withdrawal
1	PER_AC1	Application was finalized when promoter refused grant
2	PER_AC2	Others
3	PER_AD1	Withdrawal by the promotor
4	PER_AD2	No grants can be approved for projects that were started before the application was presented
5	RI_AC1	There is evidence that the promoter started the work before applying for the grant
6	RI_AC2	Reasons beyond the control of the association
7	RI_AD1	The proposed action does not conform to the conditions established within the framework of the applicable rules
8	RI_AD2	Withdrawal due to it being impossible to execute the investment
9	RI_ASOM1	No data
10	RI_ASOM2	Withdrew before grant was awarded
11	RP_AC1	Once the deadline for signing contracts, 30th April 2015, had passed, the Territorial Delegation of Agriculture, Fishing and Rural Development does not permit any further processing of the application, which means that this Territorial Council does not have the necessary power to do so
12	RP_AC2	The promoter withdrew on a particular date
13	RP_AD1	Lack of finance
14	RP_ASOM1	Proposal for rejection of the project in the report on its lawfulness, suitability and gender and youth approach
15	RP_ASOM2	Budgeted funds have been spent
16	PER_REL1	Funds earmarked for grants under Measure 413 have been spent
17	PER_REL2	No data

Source Drawn up by the authors on the basis of data supplied by the Department of Agriculture and Regional Development of the Regional Government of Andalusia

files. Four typical reasons were put forward in the interviews. These reasons are not mutually exclusive as in some cases more than one was cited:

Firstly, funding problems, a cause that encompasses quite varying situations, ranging from the association's inability to advance the money required for the project to the fact that by the time the project was approved, all the LAG funds had been spent.

Secondly, schedule-related problems, covering both the cases in which the project had already been started before the call for grant applications and those in which the promoters withdrew due to long delays in responding to their applications or being placed on a waiting list.

Thirdly, a lack of experience with bureaucratic processes that caused some associations to withdraw.

Fourthly and lastly, a lack of understanding between the associations and the Local Action Groups, although this occurred in a very small minority of cases.

Failure due to financial problems had a range of different causes. The most common cited by the people interviewed was having to invest money from their own funds while waiting for the grant to be paid. As these are essentially local associations which depend on subsidies, and small amounts raised from the fees paid by members or supporters, this situation often created uncertainty or simply rendered the projects unsustainable. This is what happened for example with an association in the province of Seville. The families at a private school had proposed that the artistic gymnastics club should be extended. The association applied for a project for this purpose. The initial idea was for joint funding: the school, which was run by a religious institution, would pay for the building work and the association would provide the sports equipment. Both the association and above all the school had to advance the money, which made the project unviable. The association emphasized that the procedure could be a problem for non-profit-making organizations of this kind and would possibly be more suitable for private sector promoters rather than for the third sector:

“Yes, because at that time they didn’t have the necessary support, or to put it plainly, they didn’t have the money to do it. As it was building work where we had... where they gave you the grant after having carried out the work, after having spent the money. Then, it was impossible for them (the nuns who ran the school) to carry out the building work even though later they would recover the money. You know what I think? [...] It’s more aimed at companies. We’re a non-profit-making body and it’s aimed at profit-making organizations or companies. It can’t be applied to a sports club” (PER_AC1).

The second reason we identified was related to problems with schedules. Once again, the situations were very varied. Some associations claimed that the grant arrived late, with the date for expiry of the project just around the corner, which made it very difficult for them to spend the agreed grant contribution in such a short time. This is what happened to the association for the promotion of tourism in Osuna in the province of Seville that we mentioned earlier. The association identified an opportunity in the fact that the Local Action Group had allocated a considerable amount of money to be spent on promoting tourism in the area. The association itself had already been carrying out different activities in support of rural development through tourism: these included creating an inventory of resources, an informative website, training courses, etc. As part of these initiatives, they applied to the Local Action Group for various projects. However, they were all rejected, except one, which was approved late, making it difficult to spend the money in such a short time. So, in the end, they were forced to withdraw:

“They only approved one project but it was a project that they approved with a really short deadline ... the project involved hiring personnel and it was almost impossible because they approved the hiring of staff but they offered us an amount, which I don’t remember now, but it was a huge amount and we had to justify spending it in 2 months. We couldn’t create a job that involved spending 100,000 euros in two months, because it seemed a completely mad amount. Who were we going to hire for such huge amounts? It made no sense and so we practically decided there and then to say no because it was unviable with this deadline. I think it was just a couple of months. I don’t know if the spending period finished in November, something like that, and they approved it in September...” (PER_AC2).

In line with the above, in some cases the project was presented when there were very few funds left, on occasions due to lack of information. The associations complained about the procedure adopted by some of the Local Action Groups in which projects were processed on the basis of their order of registration rather than on other criteria such as the quality or the need for the proposed project. This is what happened to the previous association with another of the projects they presented:

“It wasn’t a competitive system in that the projects were considered on the basis of order of arrival and that’s how the projects were approved. Something of which we were unaware. So of course, as we presented so many projects, well it took time to draw them up. We presented them within the deadline, but too late to have any real chance. They were approved according to the order they were presented, something that we think is bad. Because as we told them, the people who know how the system works, well they present their project on the first day. We could have done that too, present various projects on the first day” (PER_AC2).

Another frequently repeated complaint referred to the bureaucratic obstacles, such that for some associations they were sufficient reason for giving up. It is important to remember that in many cases, as they are local associations, they had previously only had to apply for municipal subsidies or other much smaller grants and nothing on this scale. It is also important not to forget when it comes to carrying out work of this kind that many associations are structured around volunteers rather than around professionals. The story told by another association from Seville sheds a lot of light on this question. In this case, it is a small association that was created out of a painting workshop and wanted to contribute to enhancing the cultural and natural heritage in the area around the Doñana National Park, which covers parts of the provinces of Seville, Cádiz and above all Huelva. One of the ideas that the association had was to create a website, for which purpose they applied for a small grant. However, they ended up abandoning this idea due to the extensive bureaucratic rigmarole required of them.

“We ended up exhausted by all the paperwork demanded by the administration for the small amount of money we were applying for. In any case even if the amount had been much larger, the set-up that any entity would require to obtain a grant of this nature is tremendous, because it seems like an impossible obstacle race. A huge amount of documentation was required, a lot of it quite absurd in our opinion. In other words, the bureaucratic procedure was very complicated, not complex, complicated.” (RI_AC1).

Finally, we come to the lack of understanding between the promoters and the Local Action Groups that manage the grants. We have left this till last because it affected only a small minority of cases. Problems of communication, a lack of experience

and information lie at the root of the dissatisfaction of some promoters. As we will later go on to see, these are the promoters who gave a very poor score to the role played by the Local Action Groups as regards their management of the LEADER programme during the study period.

3.3 Opinions of the LEADER Programme

Even though the interviewees came from associations with failed projects, most of them had positive opinions of the LEADER programme. However, there were some notable differences between them.

As regards the support received from the Local Action Group, in general they expressed positive opinions, although the average score was not particularly high at 5.8 points out of 10. The vast majority (10 out of 17 of the associations that responded to our questionnaire) gave the support they received from the LAG a “pass” (5 or over). Six of these gave them a high score (8 points) and one even gave them an “Excellent” (10 points). The most negative opinions came from just five associations who said that they had a bad experience. Once again, they complained about the bureaucratic obstacles in the programme and about not receiving much support or being poorly informed. They compared their experience with LEADER with other calls for projects in other funding programmes where the process is easier. By way of illustration, here is the opinion of one of the associations (RI_AD1), which more than a complaint about the Local Action Group that handled the application is a criticism of the bureaucratic functioning of the programme.

“They raise so many objections when it comes to doing things. Then when the funds are finally approved, you can spend years and years before you actually receive them and when a particular action has been approved, to actually get paid for the work, they start asking you for more and more paperwork as if they weren’t keen to give it to you. It’s not like in the normal subsidies when there are a set of rules and you follow them and you know exactly what expenses you have to justify” (RI_AD1).

As regards the average score given to the LEADER programme, it scraped a pass but only just, with an average score of 5.5. This score is distorted to some extent by the very negative perception of three associations, which gave it a zero. In fact, of the 17 associations only six gave it a score of less than 5. The others ranged between 6 and 10 points, a maximum score that was awarded by three of these associations. In order to check this result, we included another question with qualitative ordinal values: 8 associations offered a positive response, with two giving it an “excellent” rating; 4 considered it “OK”, while the other five confirmed their negative assessment of the programme.

These results explain why little more than half the associations (9 out of 17) said that after this failed experience, they had presented another project within the framework of the LEADER programme, although only five of these were successful. These same associations also said that they would be prepared to apply again for another LEADER grant in future.

The main criticism lodged against the programme is that it does not adapt well to non-profit-making organizations. This observation is based on various interlinked arguments. Firstly, the fact that part of the associative framework is based on voluntary work which many people do in their free time. They are often not professionals in their fields and do not have much experience when it comes to preparing projects of these kinds and steering them through an application process, in which one of the main reasons for the withdrawal of projects is the many administrative obstacles. This is what happened for example in the case of an association made up of a group of volunteers who wanted to restore some of the less well-known heritage buildings in their town. They wanted to keep their initiative independent of the town council in order to guarantee the continuity of the project in the face of the changes that occur when the political party in power at the Town Hall is replaced by a rival with different priorities.

“In our association, everybody works, we are all happy to do so. But when it comes to applying for a grant, if we have to work for hours and hours only for it to be rejected. Of course, we all chip in, we all help each other out, you know what I mean?... and the grant itself is wonderful, but it takes a hell of a lot of work to get it too” (RI_AC2).

Another interesting opinion was provided by women’s associations, whose presence in rural areas has grown considerably in recent years. In this way, they have assumed a key role in the creation of mutual support networks and social dynamization and have learnt how to channel different interests within Andalusia (Sánchez-Muros & Jiménez Rodrigo, 2013). In spite of this, women and young people are the social groups that face the most difficulties when it comes to setting up businesses within the LEADER scheme (Cejudo García et al., 2020). At first because many of the people within these associations lacked the necessary professional experience. Some associations decided to turn themselves into cooperatives because they were told this might make the presentation and execution of LEADER projects easier (Cózar Valero, 2005). However, the difficulties they faced cannot all be put down to a lack of professionalization. One example was a women’s association in the province of Cadiz whose objectives included covering a range of different needs in their area while also contributing to female employment. Created at the beginning of the 1990s, it emerged out of the need to coordinate the efforts of the different women’s associations that had been appearing in the area. The various actions that they managed to carry out included the coordination of a network of nursery schools. In 2008, a transcendental change took place: responsibility for nursery schools was transferred from the Department of Equality and Social Welfare to the Department of Education, which obliged the schools to offer dining facilities. In this new context, they decided to set up their own catering service in view of the fact that the companies that could offer this service were situated a long way away. An application was presented to LEADER, but in the end the project was rejected because, in spite of the claims to the contrary, they felt that the association was trying to provide a service that by law the nursery schools were obliged to provide themselves. When we asked the representatives of this Association for her opinion of the LEADER programme,

she said that it was necessary, but had various aspects that could be improved, in particular to adapt it to the needs of associations:

“I would not rate it as excellent, but I wouldn’t say it was bad either. It’s something that could be improved. I think there are a lot of things that they don’t take into account in terms of the real situation in our areas, but that’s just my personal opinion and the grants always come in very handy [...]. Look, one thing which is very clear, which they don’t take into account in Europe, is that here in this area and other women in other rural areas, women’s associations can dynamize the local economy and society. We are now getting involved in economic projects, we create employment, we create services. However, they don’t treat us... they treat us like a normal company, which means you have to advance the money. And in the percentage covered by the grant they don’t take anything into consideration either, they just treat you like a normal company and we are not normal companies we are non-profit making bodies. I think this is an important defect that they don’t take into account, allegedly because maybe they don’t even realize. I don’t know if it’s just me, but I have the impression that Europe is a little inaccessible and a lot of information goes missing along the way in both directions” (RI_ASOM1).

On a slightly different tack, the associations also emphasize the difficulties they encounter when applying for large-scale projects or projects with a high budget. As they are non-profit-making bodies, they do not have sufficient resources to co-finance or advance the money. Many of them subsist on membership fees and small public subsidies. In this sense, in theory they might have fewer problems with small projects with a lower budget. However, in these cases too, they are put off by the huge amount of paperwork involved in the project application. Another women’s association, this time from the province of Almeria, illustrated these observations with an account of their experience. This association appeared at the end of the 1990s to carry out a range of cultural and informative activities about gender equality. In 2010, they presented a project about some informative events they planned to hold, but their application was rejected. They repeated the experience in 2013, and this time they were successful. Nonetheless, they were unhappy about the expense this required of the association:

“We don’t have money for ourselves and we have to contribute to this and to cap it all we have to pay up front ... Well, we would either have to have the money already or ask for a loan. But what associations ask for loans? Paying interest, you end up losing money. Exactly, in the LEADER programme, I wouldn’t ask for grants or subsidies because of that. Because they won’t go further than 45%, I think it is, and you have to put up the rest plus VAT. We are an association that operates with small membership fees. We don’t have money to do a big project. We have enough for the everyday things we do, but not for anything else” (RI_ASOM2).

Lastly, we should include the opinion of some of the religious associations. Some of the projects they presented were quite original and sought to build bridges with other positive things that people were trying to promote in the town. This was what happened with a religious brotherhood from a town in Cadiz, who wanted to restore the country chapel, where the saint that they paid homage to was kept. This was part of a wider plan to integrate the annual pilgrimage to the chapel into projects for the dynamization of the natural park and the valorization of the local environment. The problem in this case was that the project was overly ambitious, and it was presented at

the end of the programming period when they were virtually no funds left to finance it.

“It was all very surprising because of course it was a project submitted by a religious organization. It caused quite a stir, at first glance. However, when we explained our project, it fitted in very well with what was going on at the time. because it was for a very specific period, when we hold the pilgrimage to the country chapel, which is one of the most important events in the village. It could have been combined with environmental activities, the Natural Park Interpretation Centre. The truth is it was a project that we found very exciting and still do. But obviously now, without a grant of some kind, LEADER or something similar, well frankly it would be unviable” (PER_REL2).

4 Conclusions

The stories told by the different associations that we interviewed reveal that many third sector projects in Andalusia failed due to factors that point in two conflicting directions. On the one hand, the LEADER programme does not always seem to adapt to the non-profit-making associative fabric in terms of both its excessively bureaucratic procedures and the delays when it comes to paying out the money required to make the investment. Many associations and particularly the small ones have trouble adapting to all these obstacles. The projects are sometimes so small that in the end they decide to look for other more accessible sources of finance or they downsize the project in line with the limited funds available. Some even abandon the original idea. As one of the interviewees argued, LEADER seems better adapted to private businesses than to associations. Another factor is the lack of experience of some associations, particularly the smaller ones, which do not have sufficient time or experience to negotiate all the different procedural hurdles. In the middle, are the Local Action Groups, which can play a key role in both adapting the programme to the specific circumstances of the association, as far as they can, and in informing people about the possibilities of the programme, another of the aspects criticized by the associations we interviewed.

As mentioned in the introduction, the programming period we analysed (2007–2013) coincided with the beginning and the worst years of the economic crisis that started in 2008, although the first signs of economic downturn appeared the year before. This led to several years of severe recession (2009, 2011, 2012 and 2013), years in which unemployment rose as attempts were made to cut the national deficit. In this sense, LEADER finance could have played a vital role for many of these associations, and by extension for the local population, to mitigate the lack of support from Spanish governmental institutions. In other words, this small sample of associations and the work that they do reveals the key role they can play when given the chance to carry out all the projects that they devise to improve life in rural areas. In this period however, their activity was constrained by the extremely severe limits imposed on their access to bank loans, in part due to the crisis in the financial sector, and in particular in the Savings Banks (*Cajas de Ahorro*) which had previously had strong links with the third sector. The generalized economic difficulties within which

LEADER was implemented ended up affecting all the promoters (Belliggiano et al., 2020), although the associations that make up the third sector were hit much harder, as they were poorly prepared from both a technical and a financial point of view.

Lastly, we should highlight the importance of this study and of having discovered first-hand the opinions of the associations that took part in this programme, so as to find out more about its flaws and gaps. Information like this will help us improve the LEADER programme, as the official data remain incomplete, confusing and on some occasions, perhaps even far from the truth.

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The Difficult, Limited Involvement of Public Actors in the LEADER Programme. Initiatives Which Got Left Behind in the Rural Areas of Andalusia



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Abstract In this chapter, we explore the ultimate specific causes of the failure of the projects promoted by public actors, in particular town councils, within the framework of the LEADER neo-endogenous rural development programme. To this end, we analysed the project proposals presented by public bodies in each Local Action Group (LAG) area in Andalusia during the 2007–2013(+2) programming period, focusing on those in which the project was ultimately not carried out with LEADER funds and/or in which the project application was abandoned at some stage of the procedure. We began by analysing the regional government’s official internal database, created by the LAGs. This was followed by a series of semi-structured interviews. The results revealed the following: the official reasons for abandoning the project, opinions about the LEADER approach and the LAGs and the deep underlying causes for abandoning or withdrawing these initiatives. The complexity of the process is causing a regression in the essential principles of the LEADER approach, which makes public actors reluctant to participate, to such an extent that some see the LAGs as just another public body, as “inhibitors” rather than as “facilitators”. Unfortunately, the result is that half of the projects become little more than files which lie forgotten in drawers or heaps of paper. In addition, the role of these public actors appears to be limited to that of promoters and other types of involvement are difficult to discern. Our results also indicate that size matters. The villages with the smallest number of inhabitants often do not have the resources, technical personnel and capacity to carry out rural development projects. For their part, the provincial councils have played a largely irrelevant role as creators of initiatives or as providers of economic support for these

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small municipalities. It is therefore necessary to simplify the bureaucratic process, reduce the waiting time and advance payment of at least part of the grant.

Keywords LEADER approach · Neo-endogenous rural development · Failed projects · Public initiative · Andalusia

1 Introduction

When it comes to improving the application of rural development programmes, it is essential to analyse the application of these projects and programmes, not only from the perspective of evaluating the practical implementation of the programme and the application procedure but also from a more theoretical research perspective. In this way, “evaluation is potentially much more than an opportunity to demonstrate the value of an investment to exogenous funders of rural development. It is also an opportunity to foster social learning within rural development, and to demonstrate integrity between the values of the programme and the practices which it institutionalises” (High & Nemes, 2007, pp. 15–16).

In the practice of neo-endogenous rural development, there are three key actors, namely private businesses, the third sector and the public sector, who collaborate to implement the local development strategies and together make up the public–private partnerships known as Local Action Groups (LAGs). In this chapter, we will be looking at the ultimate specific causes for the failure of projects promoted by the public sector. To this end, we will be analysing the projects presented in each of the LAG areas in Andalusia in applications for LEADER funds during the 2007–2013(+2) programming period, focusing particularly on those that were not carried out with support from LEADER and in which the application was abandoned at some stage of the procedure. The official reasons for the failure of a project are recorded in the file accompanying each application. Sometimes, however, these were not the real, specific reasons why promoters decided to abandon their projects or had their applications rejected.

This chapter focuses in particular on the role of the public sector as a promoter, but these actors, above all local councils, also play an important role as local leaders, planners and also, albeit to a lesser extent, as facilitators and creators of common projects and collaboration with the rest of the territorial actors.

In this study, we will be proposing various possible hypotheses. The first is that the complexity of the process and the relatively small amount of funding that can be obtained tend to undermine the involvement and the leading role that can be played by the public sector. Local councils often find that they do not have sufficient resources, technical staff and capacity to carry out large-scale projects, and sometimes even have difficulties with simpler, less complex ones. On most occasions, the budget is “shared out” between councils, and they devote the funds to simple initiatives with very little strategic vision. These typically include pet projects put forward by the political parties or projects that closely match the lines of action set out in the LEADER

approach or in the Overall Action Strategy, but have little or no relation with the most urgent needs and expectations of the local community. Another hypothesis that we will be testing is whether the size of the municipality is important when it comes to explaining why a project succeeds or fails. We will also be investigating whether there are other roles that the public sector could play as a facilitator of projects or as a collaborator in projects presented by other local stakeholders. Our initial hypothesis is that their efforts in this direction are almost non-existent. Lastly, we will be analysing who the main public promoters were, if there was much diversity within this group or if it was basically limited to local public authorities.

After exploring the state of the art on this question, we will set out the methodology applied in this research in which two main sources were used, an internal list of the failed projects and a series of semi-structured interviews with the local council technical staff who were involved in these projects. This will be followed by the results section, in which we analyse the official reasons for abandoning a project, the particular stage at which projects were abandoned, and the success rate of public sector initiatives. After presenting various case studies, we will then look at the promoters' opinions of the LEADER approach and the LAGs and explore the deeper underlying causes as seen from the perspective of these public bodies. The chapter ends with the discussion and conclusions.

2 State of the Art

It is necessary to reiterate the importance of participation in rural development processes. The key actors include the third sector, private companies, the academic field and the public sector (Nordberg et al., 2020). In fact, the LEADER approach puts the public, private and voluntary sectors at the centre of the development process, working together in partnership within the LAGs (Edwards et al., 2001). For his part, (Ray, 2000) described LEADER as a form of intervention that was both modern and postmodern, emphasizing that the commitments accepted by the participants were small in financial terms but enabled a surprising amount of “anarchy” in the decision-making process. This same author went deeper into this question when he argued that the social, cultural and economic actors from the private, public and voluntary sectors should reflect on the available strategic options for the development of their area and participate in the design and implementation of development projects (Ray, 2006, p. 20).

For their part, (Bosworth et al., 2020) made clear that a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches was required and that the most effective results appear when the local groups are most empowered to take decisions, with a non-bureaucratic support framework. Together with this, in order to boost local entrepreneurial capacity, it is necessary to encourage the involvement and inter-sector collaboration of private, public and third-sector actors (Olmedo & O'Shaughnessy, 2022). Along similar lines, (Shucksmith, 2010, p. 1) defended the “changing role of the state (at all levels) and the greater propensity for public, private and voluntary sectors to interact

at multiple scales in diffused power contexts together with attempts to mobilize local actors". It is therefore crucial that the local authorities involved in the LAGs do not see themselves solely as promoters but also as facilitators and collaborators.

Having said that, the vertical application of economic incentives, advice and support is difficult in heterogeneous rural areas that are not always familiarized with the neo-endogenous framework (Georgios et al., 2021). Concepts and approaches such as "the bottom-up approach", "local empowerment", "social economy" and "social innovation" are often foreign to the actors who are trying to understand and apply them, including the local authorities in rural areas.

In fact, the function of the public authorities is to act not only as promoters but also as facilitators (Bosworth et al., 2020), so fostering the creation of projects by the private or voluntary sectors or jointly, while also encouraging the private and public sectors to work together. This role is also highlighted by Furmankiewicz et al., (2020, p. 177) (Furmankiewicz et al., 2020, p. 177), who highlighted the "re-positioning of local authorities as facilitators rather than suppliers in meeting local needs". As we will later go on to see, the local authorities in rural areas of Andalusia have only assumed this role to a very limited extent.

For Cejudo et al. (2021), the third sector carries out rural development work for the provision of public services such as attending to vulnerable groups in society, the restoration of local heritage, the recovery and dissemination of cultural assets or traditions, etc., which should be provided directly by the public sector or at least in step and in collaboration with it.

The importance and the leadership of local public and political actors are also highlighted by Belliggiano et al. (2020), who argue that the success of rural development actions depends on the creativity and the competence of local politicians. Therefore, a large part of the failure of these projects is related with the know-how of the public sector actors that propose them. Bowden and Joyce (2018) also emphasized the important leadership roles played by community representatives as drivers and navigators of the development process.

On occasions, however, the importance of public actors can also give way to an excessively dominant role in decision-making by the local political elite, as identified in various studies. Among these, Furmankiewicz and Macken-Walsh (2016) and Biczkowski (2020) contend that when the LAG is dominated by the public sector, the interests of the community are pushed to one side in favour of the interests of the political establishment. The local authorities and even the rural development technicians (from the LAGs or the local councils) are important members of local elites, in that the main financial resources in their areas are at their disposal, and they are the dominant decision-making actors, while other partners are often reduced to supporting roles (Furmankiewicz et al., 2020). In fact, local government representatives play a key role in many LAGs in Central and Eastern European countries, as they are reluctant to lose their grip on the purse strings in the places where they hold sway (Fałkowski, 2013; Furmankiewicz et al., 2010; Marquardt et al., 2012; Maurel, 2008).

In other words, public sector representatives have a crucial influence in decision-making and planning as members of the LAG decision-making bodies, in the identification of development objectives and in the establishment of action plans. In short, public managers often represent the dominant group in partnership committees, and in LAG bodies (Konečný, 2019) excluding other kinds of actors (Munro et al., 2008), such that “in some cases, public institutions even acted antagonistically to embedded organizations” (Georgios et al., 2021, p. 928).

By contrast, other authors emphasize the very limited role played by the public sector as a promoter and collaborator. In this way, Cejudo-García et al. (2022) pointed out that most projects, measured in terms of total investment, are carried out by the private sector, while public sector investments are more significant in remote rural areas.

3 Methodology

The data for this chapter were obtained from two main sources, namely the internal database provided by the Regional Government of Andalusia and a series of semi-structured interviews with the promoters of six of these projects. We also included explanations obtained in interviews with the facilitators, the LAG technicians, who explained the reasons why certain public projects are not ultimately financed with LEADER funds. As High and Nemes (2007, p. 16) made clear, “a methodology considered suitable for the assessment of programmes must be strongly participative” and take into account the knowledge and opinions of the promoters.

The database consists of a list of failed projects presented in each of the LAGs in Andalusia for the 2007–2013(+2) programming period. Unfortunately, this source has not been filled out in the same way by all of the rural development technicians in the LAGs and therefore has certain gaps when it comes to the reasons for abandoning the project and the time or stage at which this happened. We have tried to correct and complete this information. We have also compared it with the public sector projects that were carried out successfully.

From our searches of the database provided by the Regional Government of Andalusia referred to above, we obtained a total of 1319 public sector initiatives which in the end were not carried out. For analysis purposes, these projects were divided into two types, “rejected” and “approved”. Projects were classified as “approved” when both the “application for funds approved/rejected” and the “total investment in contract” fields had been filled in. The project was classified as “rejected” when the application had either no information or a “zero” in the “total investment in contract” field or when the “grant application” and “total investment in contract” fields were left blank. These two groups were also divided into two further subgroups. Within the group of approved projects, we looked for the projects for which the grant had been approved and the contract signed; i.e. those in which both the “total investment in contract” and “contracted cost eligible for subsidy” fields had been filled in (code 22). The other subgroup contained the projects for which the grant

had been accepted or approved but no contract had been signed; i.e. those in which the “total investment in contract” field was left blank (21). The group of projects whose grant applications had been rejected was also divided into two subgroups. Firstly, the projects in which the “reasons for withdrawal or abandonment” field was left blank or only included words such as “abandonment”, “withdrawal”, “gives up” or similar, which implied that they had not even reached the stage of being reviewed by the LAG technicians (11). Secondly, a final subgroup made up of the projects which had been reviewed and had received a negative report from the LAG or the Regional Government of Andalusia (12) and therefore included some reason for rejection of the project prior to the award of the grant.

For the semi-structured interviews, from the database of failed projects, we selected those belonging to the public sector and tried to track down the technicians from the respective town councils who had acted as promoters of the projects. We carried out six telephone interviews in 2020, trying to find cases in municipalities of different sizes and different degrees of rurality. We found the telephone number of each Local Council online. After various attempts, we discovered that it was easier to arrange interviews with people from smaller, more peripheral town councils, while those from the larger towns were more reluctant to respond to our questions. Another problem was that in some cases the technical staff who drafted the project proposals were no longer working in the town halls when we carried out the interview. And what is more, in a few cases although we carried out the interview, we were unable to obtain any substantial information because the interviewee could not remember any specific details of the project. We will now set out the information for the municipalities and the proposals studied in greater depth through the interviews (Table 1).

The interviews were structured into the following sections: details of the proposal, official reasons for not receiving the grant, real reasons for not receiving the grant, contributions that the proposal could have made to the territory, obstacles to carrying out the project and personal opinions about the LEADER approach.

Regarding the main sections of this chapter, we begin with a brief general description and an initial analysis of the official causes set out in the database. We then classify these projects according to the particular phase of the application procedure where withdrawal took place. We also make a comparison between the failed public sector projects and those that were successfully carried out, in a bid to discover the reasons why some projects succeeded and others failed. The analysis is continued with the information provided in the semi-structured interviews, focusing on two main questions: the ultimate reasons for withdrawal and their opinions about the LEADER approach.

Table 1 Details of the project proposals analysed in the interviews

	Local action group (LAG)	Province	Year presented	Proposal	Territorial category	Population (2015)	Population density (2015) (inhab/km ²)
Case 1	Subbética Cordobesa	Córdoba	2014	Project for the consolidation and restoration of the town walls	Periurban and county capitals	+ 10,000	88.35
Case 2	Sierra Sur de Jaén	Jaén	2014	Fitting out a municipal warehouse as a centre for agri-food businesses	Periurban and county capitals	+ 10,000	82.78
Case 3	Condado de Jaén	Jaén	2014	Embellishment of the outside of the bull-ring	Intermediate rural	2001–9999	20.78
Case 4	Cuenca Minera de Ríotinto	Huelva	2012	Refurbishment and equipping of a municipal park	Deep rural	<2000	15.53
Case 5	Condado de Jaén	Jaén	2014	Refurbishment of access roads, car park and interior areas of the municipal swimming pool	Deep rural	<2000	7.72
Case 6	Alpujarra - Sierra Nevada de Granada	Granada	2014	Creation of an environmental interpretation centre	Deep rural	<2000	6.42

Source Regional Government of Andalusia. The authors

4 Results

4.1 Initial Analysis and Official Reasons for Withdrawal

A total of 3012 projects were presented by the public sector in rural areas of Andalusia during the 2007–2013(+2) programming period. Of these, a total of 1693 projects were ultimately implemented with LEADER funds. In other words, 1.3 projects were executed for every one project that was not (Table 2). This is a very high ratio if we compare it with the other kinds of promoters where the ratios are considerably less favourable (0.9). In other words, these figures suggest that the projects promoted by the public sector had a higher chance of being carried out. The average grant awarded to successfully execute public projects covered on average 74% of the total project budget, while the average grant for all projects was 20% percentage points lower at 53.5%. This suggests that in public sector projects the economic factor, financial solvency, was probably much less significant. Having said that, it is important to make clear that the percentage of failed public projects (43.8%) is still excessively high in terms of the time and effort put in by the LAGs and by the public sector promoters, technicians, employees and decision-makers.

As regards the different types of public sector promoters, almost all were town councils. Little interest was shown by other public bodies, which hardly participate in LEADER projects. It is quite striking that these other institutions, such as the provincial council, which acts as the representative of the municipalities at a provincial level, played a minimal role as promoters of rural development.

As regards the specific moment or stage in the procedure when the failed projects were withdrawn (Table 3), over half (52.5% or 693 projects) were withdrawn at the beginning of the process, shortly after the presentation of the grant application. As for the reasons for not continuing with these projects, in half of them, no reason was given, and in those in which it is mentioned, the most common reasons are “withdrawal of the promotor”, “abandonment of the promotor”, “file incomplete”

Table 2 Projects that were not carried out using LEADER funds in Andalusia for the 2007–2013(+2) programming period

Type of public entity	Number of failed initiatives	Percentage	Executed/failed ratio
Town councils	1240	94.0	1.3
Local independent body	1	0.1	1.0
Outlying area organization	19	1.4	0.9
Association of councils	48	3.6	1.0
Consortia of municipalities	9	0.7	1.4
Provincial council	2	0.2	1.5
Total public sector projects	1319	100.0	1.3
Total projects	6630	–	0.9

Source Regional government of Andalusia. Drawn up by the authors

or “finance from other funds/other grants”. The purposes of the projects that were not carried out, at least with LEADER funds, varied considerably, ranging from the refurbishment or construction of public, sports or recreational facilities; the restoration of cultural and natural heritage, museums and interpretation centres; training courses; and the promotion of tourism.

The next group of projects (392 or 29.7%) did not manage to obtain the grant either. In other words, the vast majority of the failed projects (82.2%) failed before the grant was approved. Whereas in the first group of projects, the reasons put forward were related to the promotor withdrawing or abandoning their application, having some problem with the paperwork, or looking for some other kind of funding; in the second group the LAG has reviewed and rejected the project for various reasons; e.g. it did not fall within the parameters of the overall action strategy, it did not include all the necessary documents, or the relevant territorial delegation found it ineligible or unlawful. As a whole, these projects had very similar objectives to the previous ones; enhancing the value of natural and cultural heritage, improving public facilities, tourism promotion and training.

There were just 17 projects (1.3% of all the failed projects) in the next group, i.e. the projects that failed once the grant had been approved, and before the contract was signed. In other words, although the grant had been approved, in the end the contract was not signed. In this group of failed projects, the main official reasons for failure were as follows: a lack of sufficient economic resources on the part of the LAG, a lack of the required documentation, a lack of funding and withdrawal by the promoter. Most of these projects were again linked to public and sports facilities, the promotion of tourism and the enhancement of the value of cultural heritage for tourism purposes.

And last of all there were 217 projects (16.5%) which, in spite of signing the contract for the grant, did not finally receive it for various different official reasons; these varied from withdrawal by the promoter after signing the contract, the complexity and slowness of the procedure, rejection due to problems justifying expenditure, or obtaining other grants with which LEADER was incompatible. Many of these reasons point to the low amounts of the grants and the excessive bureaucracy. These projects had very similar objectives to the previous ones: public facilities and infrastructure, the promotion of tourism and enhancing the value of local heritage.

Figure 1 shows the spatial distribution of the municipalities with failed public sector projects, promoted above all by town councils. In total, as mentioned earlier, 1319 projects were ultimately not carried out.

If we look at the figures, although the correlation between the success rate of public projects and the population of each municipality is very low at 0.002, the fact that numerous large municipalities had to carry out spending cuts and were therefore forced to withdraw from various projects, distorts this ratio. We also drew this conclusion from the interviews, which highlighted the lack of technical personnel to continue with the project applications and the lack of sufficiently high municipal budgets. To some extent and as can be seen in Table 4, there is a clear relationship between the size of the population of each municipality and the success rate of the projects promoted by their respective town councils. The councils with the lowest

Table 3 Stages in the LEADER grant application process, “official” reasons for the failure of projects, and main objectives and examples of the initiatives proposed in the rural areas of Andalusia during the 2007–2013(+2) programming period

Stages	N° projects that reached each phase	Official reasons for failure	Objectives and examples of the proposed projects
Grant application and resolution phase			
Submission of grant application	3012(–693)	“Withdrawal by promotor”, “abandonment by promotor”, “file incomplete” and “finance obtained from other funds/grants”	<p>Refurbishment of day centre for the elderly in Ventas de Huelma</p> <p>Refurbishment of public park and exercise equipment for the elderly</p> <p>Repair and improvement of Camino del Montecillo</p> <p>Chameleon Interpretation Centre</p> <p>Construction of a Sports Pavilion</p> <p>Course for guides for horseback tourism and nature-based activities</p> <p>Decoration of the Calle Sol in Arbúmel</p> <p>1st Broad Bean Gastronomy Day</p> <p>Promotion of tourism in the Town of Montilla</p> <p>Restoration of the Arabic Baths of Dólar and adaptation for museum purposes</p>
Technical/economic report	2319 (–392)	“Rejection by the Territorial Council due to a lack of the required documents”, “Lack of the required documents”, “Lack of finance”, “Report from the Territorial Delegation declaring the project unlawful”, “The intervention does not comply with the specifications of the Overall Action Strategy” and “Others”	<p>Refurbishment of the Montagón Recreational Area</p> <p>Repair of the Camino Rural de la Granja de la Encina in Santa Ana,</p> <p>Refurbishment of the cave-houses of Cortes and their surrounding area</p> <p>Cave-Dwelling Interpretation Centre</p> <p>Installation of fibre optic network for the main municipal offices</p> <p>Decoration of the old town of Moguer</p> <p>Equipment for children’s park</p> <p>1st Bee Fair in Castilblanco de los Arroyos</p> <p>Roman gastronomy and culture days</p> <p>Valorization and refurbishment of main entrance to Almachar</p>

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

Stages	N° projects that reached each phase	Official reasons for failure	Objectives and examples of the proposed projects
Approval/rejection of the project	1927(-17)	<p>“Rejection by the Territorial Council: Lack of sufficient finance under Measure 413.; prior to the deadline set by the Directorate-General for the pledging of funds”, “Lack of the required documents”, “Lack of finance” and “Withdrawal by promoter”</p>	<p>Construction of Swimming Pool in Estella del Marqués Decoration of area around the Sanctuary of la Fuensanta for tourism purposes Rural and adventure tourism fair in Bollulllos de la Mitación Installation of two children’s parks and bio-health circuits</p>
Grant contract (acceptance of the grant)	1910(-217)	<p>“Decision by Territorial Council to withdraw”, “Complexity in the processing”, “Rejected due to problems justifying expenditure”, “The promoter does not accept the grant”, “Lack of the required documents”, “Lack of finance”, “Finished with withdrawal”, “Finance from another fund”, “Failed to meet completion deadline”, “Obtained other grants”, “Others”, “Requests withdrawal after Grant Contract”, “Delay in the grant award decision”</p>	<p>Repair of rural tracks: Caminos de Peroamigo, Las Cortecillas and El Peralejo Construction of Park and Ride in Valdevaqueros Creation of interpretation centre in the Belmez Faces tourism resource Creation of creche in the town of Comares Creation of business start-up centre Equipment for the proximity service for dependent people Installation of low-consumption street lighting in Torre Alháuquime Sports track in the Matallana industrial estate Restoration of the building housing the Roman Baths Promotional Video of Padules</p>

Justification and payment phase

Payment of the grant	1693
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Source: Andalusian Regional Government. Aljarafe-Doñana LAG (2013). Guide to the LEADER grant application procedure 2007–2013. <http://www.adad.es/files/Guia%20Rapida%20Tramitacion%20actualizada%20el%203%20de%20julio%202013.pdf>. NORORMA LAG. <https://www.nororma.com/procedimiento-ayudas/> Saja-Nansa LAG. Flow Chart for the LEADER grant application procedure 2014–2020. The authors

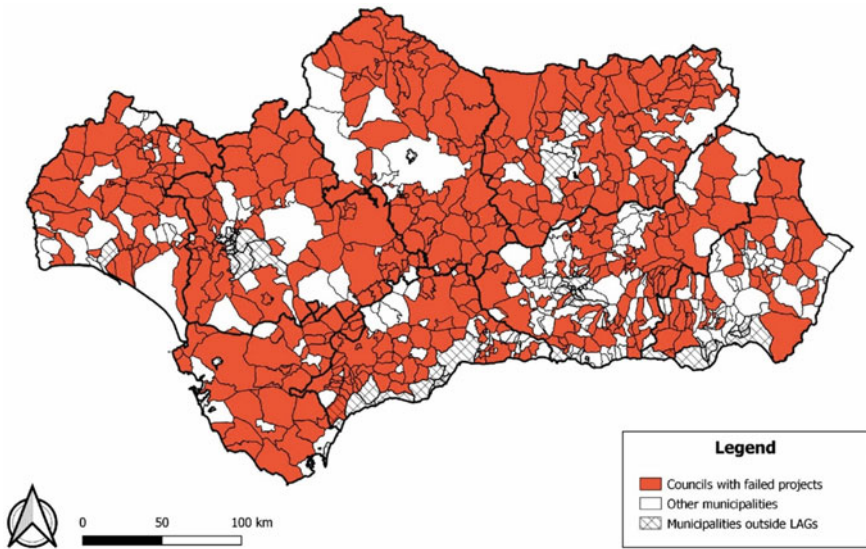


Fig. 1 Failed public sector projects within the LEADER approach in the rural areas of Andalusia for the 2007–2013(+2) programming period. *Source* Regional Government of Andalusia. Drawn up by the authors

budgets and the fewest technicians for preparing the applications (such as Alicún, Bacares, Beires or Bentarique, for example), in general either did not present projects or if they did, most of them failed. The exception to this rule regarding the failure of projects due to the size of the municipality (larger towns are more successful because they have greater human and economic resources) can be found in another group of municipalities (such as Arriate, Puebla del Río, Chirivel or Algodonales). This could well be because they had high levels of debt and therefore had to carry out an austerity plan to balance their books, so obliging them to withdraw from the application process. In addition, and as various LAGs made clear, some of the proposals were buried once the elections were over. Another reason that contributed to the failure of many public projects was the disputes between different political parties and between different levels of government (municipal, provincial and/or regional governments). In some cases, the LAGs rejected applications involving interpretation centres or museums because they were not part of their main strategies. There were other municipalities with larger populations and budgets (Padul, Puebla de Cazalla, Fuente Obejuna and Sorbas), which had greater success rates, so confirming the link between the two. In short, the size of the municipality does matter.

Table 4 Extreme success/failure rates in LEADER projects carried out by local councils in rural municipalities in Andalusia during the 2007–2013(+2) programming period

Town councils	Executed	Failed	Success rate	Population 2015
Arriate	0	8	0	4157
La Puebla del Rfo	0	8	0	12,114
Chirivel	0	7	0	1604
Algodonales	0	7	0	5649
Alicún	0	1	0	220
Bacares	0	1	0	278
Beires	0	1	0	119
Bentarique	0	1	0	258
Padul	8	0	8	8407
La Puebla de Cazalla	8	0	8	11,241
Fuente Obejuna	11	0	11	4894
Sorbas	25	0	25	2608

Source Regional Government of Andalusia. The authors

4.2 Economic and Participation Data in the Study Cases

In their project applications, the town councils must specify the budget for execution of the project. The size of the municipality limits the amount of public funds that can be invested in the project.

In some of the funding lines, 100% of the projects can be subsidized, and in other cases, the grant covers a large proportion of the budget, although not all. The promoters must cover the rest, although the contribution that public sector promoters have to make is always smaller than the percentage put up by private businesses in their projects.

We will begin by looking at municipalities that are capitals of their sub-regions, for which we have two examples. In Case 1, the budget for the project was around 24,000 euros, of which the grant covered 75% (18,000 euros). In Case 2, the municipality planned to make an investment of 297,674 euros for the installation of an agrarian cooperative, of which 50,000 was to be provided by the LAG grant. The rest of the funding was to come from the Town Council's own funds.

In Case 3 in an intermediate rural area, the local council presented a project with a budget of 16,441 euros and a grant of 13,680 euros.

The last three study cases were in "deep rural" areas. In Case 4, the grant covered the entire budget of 43,531 euros. The same happened in Case 5 with 53,829 euros. In the last case, Case 6, the grant of 250,000 euros covered over half the initial budget of 340,000 euros.

The funding problem is exacerbated by the fact that the promoter is obliged to advance the funds. This makes the project a challenge that is sometimes insurmountable for the councils because they are constrained as to the amount they can invest

from their own funds, the amount they can borrow from banks and how much of their own resources they can assign to these projects.

In the different cases we analysed, the discourses regarding citizen participation varied considerably as in one they considered that participation was high, while in the others it was of little or no importance. In two of the cases, the people interviewed explained that regardless of the degree of citizen participation, the town councils bore in mind the needs and the demands of the local people and the people were satisfied with the projects that they had carried out in the past. Some also complained that they felt limited when it came to making proposals, in that they tended to carry out projects that fell within with the lines of action that LEADER and its respective strategies might regard as beneficial, so restricting the implementation of projects that might be more beneficial or a higher priority for local people.

4.3 Opinions About the LEADER Approach and the LAGs

Of the six local councils selected, four rated the LEADER grants positively, giving them a score of 8 or more out of 10. The other two councils gave them much poorer grades of 3 out of 10 (Case 5) and 4 out of 10 (Case 2). Unlike other kinds of LEADER applicants, one would imagine that local councils are used to these kinds of procedures and have the necessary resources to manage them without undue difficulty. However, when one delves deeper into the reasons behind the negative opinions of LEADER, the interviewees emphasized the excessive bureaucracy and the complexity of the grant application procedure. In particular, one of the councils that gave the LEADER approach a very low score complained that the procedure had been getting worse over the years and that today it was inoperable (Case 2), as they made clear with the following comments:

"I think that they [the LEADER grants] were very good when this first started in 1992 or 93. I think the strategy at the time was very good, very good. Later, as time went by, it became more and more bureaucratic and the procedures became completely dysfunctional. Everything is far too complicated".

For its part, the promoters in Case 5 explained that their negative opinion was due to the complexity of the application procedure for a small local council like theirs, a municipality with less than 2000 inhabitants and a very limited number of council workers. They asserted that small town councils are at a disadvantage in these procedures in that they do not have qualified personnel dedicated full-time to managing subsidies of this kind. In fact, in another town council from a deep rural municipality (Case 4), they also mentioned the difficulty of managing the applications for LEADER funds due to the lack of personnel. In fact, this was the only case in which they gave the LEADER approach a high score while criticizing the process for being very demanding. In both cases, they claimed that the process led to negative emotions such as stress and frustration which were a strong disincentive for trying to implement projects based on these grants:

“Grant applications are incredibly complicated for a small town-council which doesn’t have staff devoted to this specific job. That is, it’s tremendously complicated. The bureaucratic application procedure would put anyone off (...). I know that in those cases where there are qualified staff for these procedures, it would not be complicated, but for us as a town council with less than 2000 inhabitants, I give it [the LEADER grant procedure] a 3”

Despite this, the negative opinions of the LEADER approach are not linked to the role played by the LAGs as mediators in the process. The different town councils are highly pleased with the support they receive from them, regardless of the score they give to the LEADER approach in general. Some said that they had regular contact with the LAGs and appreciated the efforts made by the LAG Technicians to help Local Councils promote their projects. However, one of them mentioned that this creates an additional stage in the application procedure so making the process even slower (Case 2).

The projects analysed here were not the only applications made by these councils for LEADER grants, in that they had also made a number of previous and subsequent applications for these funds. One might imagine that a negative experience would influence their negative opinion of the grants. However, we also found that in all cases they had applied for grants of this kind in both previous and subsequent calls for projects and that many of them had been approved. For some of the town councils, the fact that they had successfully carried out projects in the past was a plausible argument for their high opinion of LEADER grants. Whereas for those with a poor opinion, the difficulties they encountered in the procedure seem to weigh more heavily than whether or not they finally obtained LEADER funds for these successful projects. In fact, in one of the cases, they have no plans to apply for these grants in future due to the excessively bureaucratic application process involved (Case 5).

Finally, the town councils were asked to make suggestions as to how to improve the LEADER grant process. Regardless of whether they had poor or high opinions of LEADER, the proposals were centred on three principal issues: simplifying the application procedure, in terms of both the amount of documentation and the fine level of detail required; reducing the waiting time; and lastly advancing payment of at least part of the grant.

In summary, it seems that the bureaucratic problems are one of the main weaknesses of the LEADER grant process, even for town councils. Simplification of this process would increase their participation, especially in the smallest town councils that do not have the necessary resources to embark on a bureaucratic procedure of this kind in the same conditions as other larger ones.

4.4 Underlying Causes of Withdrawal or Abandonment of These Projects

The reasons for withdrawing or abandoning an application for a LEADER grant can be analysed from two perspectives. Firstly, the reasons put forward by the LAGs, and secondly the reasons put forward by the public sector promoters of these projects. In

this section, we will be analysing this second group of reasons cited by the promoters we interviewed which, as can be seen in Table 5, are substantially different from the reasons set out in the official list.

Firstly, Case 1, a municipality in the province of Cordoba in which the Council applied in 2014 for a grant for a project for the consolidation and restoration of the town walls. This project was proposed because the Council wanted to make the town more attractive for Spanish and international visitors by enhancing its heritage and history. This project was also necessary for safety reasons in that there were various houses under the wall which were in danger of falling down. However, in spite of not receiving any grants from LEADER, we do not know the official reasons why the project was withdrawn or the reasons put forward by the Local Council because the project was withdrawn even before it had been reviewed by the LAG. It was later carried out with funds from other sources, although the Council had to wait for about a year before the LAG officially informed it that the project had been rejected. The fact that the application was submitted at the end of the programming period may have been another reason, as it is possible that the LAG had already spent the LEADER funds allocated to that line of action.

In the next case, Case 2, a municipality in the province of Jaén, in 2014 the local Council wanted to refurbish a municipal warehouse as a centre for agri-food companies. The main reason behind this project was that asparagus growing had become increasingly important in the town over the previous 15 years. The Council therefore wanted to create an industrial unit which could be used as a centre for the initial classification of the crop, which could then be taken to another unit once the first phase had been completed. The aim of the proposal was to enable the entire agri-food cycle to be carried out within the municipality, and to create about 60 jobs in this new unit, with 30 people working in the morning shift and 30 more in the afternoon/evening, so boosting the local economy. With the support of the funds from the LAG, the council initially intended to invest around 50,000 euros. In the end, however, costs spiralled and the final investment was in the region of 200,000 euros. This project involved joint collaboration between the public sector and an agricultural cooperative in the town, so creating a public-private collaboration. In the end, however, the cooperative decided not to invest in the project and the town council decided to finance it by itself. The official reason put forward by the LAG for withdrawal from the project coincides with that put forward by the Local Council, namely that the investment had not been justified within the stipulated deadline. In the end, the project was carried out, albeit with the local council's own funds, and they had to wait for over a year for a reply from the LAG.

We will now turn to Case 3, a municipality in the province of Jaén, where the Council planned to embellish the bullring by installing a statue. They therefore decided to apply for a LEADER grant in the call for projects in the year 2014. The official reason put forward for the withdrawal of the project was that the Territorial Delegation of Agriculture of the Regional Government of Andalusia did not consider the project eligible for a grant. Although the person we interviewed could not remember the real reason in that someone else had proposed the project, it is important to highlight that in the interview the Town Council confirmed that the

Table 5 Reasons for withdrawal in the case studies analysed here

Cases	Proposed project	Official reason for withdrawal	Reason put forward by the promoter	Stage at which the project was withdrawn/rejected
Case 1	Project for the consolidation and restoration of the town walls	Not specified in the database	Does not remember	11 (After applying for the grant)
Case 2	Fitting out a municipal warehouse as a centre for agri-food businesses	Promotor gave up trying to justify the investment	Deadlines, time, council had insufficient capacity	22 (After the grant had been approved and the contract signed)
Case 3	Embellishment of the outside of the bull-ring	The Territorial Delegation (Reg. Gov. Andalusia) did not consider the project eligible for a grant	They funded and implemented the project by other means	12 (After review by the Territorial Delegation)
Case 4	Refurbishment and equipping of a municipal park	Required documents missing	Does not remember	12 (After review by the LAG)
Case 5	Refurbishment of access roads, car park and interior areas of the municipal swimming pool	Report by the Territorial Delegation (Reg. Gov. Andalusia) declaring the application illegal	Rejected by the Territorial Delegation of the Environment, due to the presence of a drover's road	12 (After review by the Territorial Delegation)
Case 6	Creation of an environmental interpretation centre	Withdrawal	Withdrawal	22 (After the grant had been approved and the contract signed)

Source Regional Government of Andalusia and fieldwork. The authors

project had eventually been carried out using the Council's own funds. The time that elapsed between presenting the proposal and receiving a definitive reply from the LAG was considerably less than one year, at around six months.

In Case 4, a deep rural municipality in the province of Huelva, in 2012 the Town Council applied for a grant for the refurbishment and equipping of a Municipal Park. Although the official reason for withdrawal was that the required documentation had not been provided, the person interviewed said that he did not remember why the project had been withdrawn. He commented that the project had eventually been carried out but with the Town Council's own funds. He said that he could not remember how long they had had to wait before receiving a definitive answer from the LAG.

In Case 5, a municipality in the province of Jaén, in 2014, the Council applied for a LEADER grant for the repair of the access roads, car parks and grounds of the municipal swimming pool. They planned to tarmac a few metres outside the municipal swimming pool and repair the access road, planting a few trees in the area around the swimming pool. However, it turned out that the work they intended to carry out on the swimming pool was near the drover's road known as the Cañada Real de la Mancha. This made the application process much more complicated as authorization for building this road had to be requested from both the Department of Development and the Department of Agriculture. In the end, the latter Department rejected the proposal in a report claiming that the project was unlawful. The project was frozen until the year 2020, when it was restarted, although without the support of LEADER grants and with help from the Provincial Council instead. After the execution of the project, the Department of Agriculture opened an investigation and issued them with a fine of 18,000 euros and ordered them to remove what they had built.

Finally, Case 6, a town in the province of Granada. In 2014, the Town Council applied for a LEADER grant for the creation of an environmental interpretation centre. Although the grant was approved by the LAG, the Council eventually decided not to go ahead as its own contribution came to 100,000 euros, which at that time was a huge amount of money for them to spend. When asked about the time they had had to wait for a definitive decision on their application, they said there was a waiting period of over 1 year and that the decision approving their application was not issued until 2015.

In the six cases studied here, there have been a series of obstacles that may have influenced the execution of a project. The main obstacle they mention is cumbersome bureaucracy. The applications became very complex and very slow and time-consuming. Another obstacle that the interviewees considered significant was the lack of economic resources: "There's never enough money, you know what I mean? When it comes to executing an annual budget, there are projects that you can't carry out and you have to prioritize" (Case 5). Another obstacle mentioned was the continual economic crises, and in particular the financial crisis of 2008 onwards. In small municipalities, they complained that they did not have the necessary human and logistical resources to prepare applications for rural development grants and then carry out the projects. Unlike the social obstacles which seem to have obstructed the

implementation of various projects, internal conflicts within the Town Council do not seem to have played a significant role in the failure of the projects in the six case studies.

The degree of rurality and its associated problems may also have been obstacles in the LEADER grant application process. Depopulation and ageing are continual concerns because the town councils are constantly trying to improve and create new services and facilities in the municipality so as to encourage people to stay, thereby maintaining population levels.

“We worry a lot, above all about the school” (Case 4).

In addition, these rural municipalities are often far away from the provincial capital in both distance and time:

“[The capital] is 125 kms away (...) there are old livestock tracks and there are drovers’ roads. It takes an eternity to get to the capital” (Case 5).

In conclusion, the most commonly mentioned obstacles are firstly, the countless bureaucratic formalities that the Council had to comply with when applying for and processing a LEADER grant application and secondly a much broader obstacle such as depopulation, which affects many other aspects of local administration, including the economic side.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

The main problems encountered and the possible solutions are set out in Table 6. Firstly, the complexity of the process, a problem highlighted by all the people interviewed in the fieldwork, has caused a regression in the LEADER approach and made public actors more reluctant to get involved. As Bosworth et al. (2020) made clear, a new framework with as little bureaucracy as possible would encourage empowerment, entrepreneurship and collaboration between the different local actors, something that was often missing in the projects we studied. The fact that the promotor is obliged to advance the funds makes investing in a project a nightmare that is impossible for small public bodies. If the process were simplified, this would spur many more municipalities, especially smaller ones, to participate. It is interesting that in spite of the above, the general assessment of the work done by the LAGs is very positive, a sign of the effort put in and the support provided by the LAG technicians. In some cases, however, the interviewees regarded the LAGs as just another public body, as an additional obstacle in the process. The results highlight the irrelevance of LEADER funds in many cases. Of the six cases analysed, five were finally carried out without the support of LEADER. The complicated, long-drawn-out procedure and the accompanying bureaucracy led to a regression in the LEADER approach, which often led the LAGs and the approach in general to be viewed by promoters as “inhibitors” of development projects rather than as “facilitators”.

Table 6 Principal problems detected and possible solutions

Problems	Possible solutions
Complexity of the process	Simplification of the process
Promoter is obliged to advance the funds	Reduce waiting time
LAG is viewed as an “inhibitor”	Advance payment of the grant
Low project success rate	Increase the significance and the contribution from the LEADER approach
Poorly prepared projects that are rejected or abandoned	Support from other public institutions with human and financial resources
Few trained staff capable of carrying out projects	Greater emphasis on the bottom-up approach
Role of public actors limited to that of individual promoters, with no collaboration from other actors and without performing other functions as facilitators	Compulsory hybrid assessment
Small municipalities with insufficient resources and personnel	Clear, high-quality sources
Provincial Councils play an insignificant role	
Projects must fall within particular lines of action	
Small-scale projects of little importance	

Source The authors

In relation to the above, it is interesting to highlight the low success rate of the public projects which apply for LEADER funds, even though it is higher than the figure for private projects. Of the 3012 projects proposed by the public sector in rural areas of Andalusia during the 2007–2013(+2) programming period, 1319 fell by the wayside with all this implies in terms of stress and frustration for the technical staff, wasted time and hopes raised and then finally dashed. This low success rate is also a reflection of the poor preparation and unreadiness of many projects and of the poor training and limited time of the staff who have to do this job. In short, half of the projects became little more than files gathering dust in a drawer.

Another issue is that the role of these public actors is confined exclusively to that of promoters and other forms of involvement are blatantly absent. As a result, the collaboration between town councils and private businesses, between town councils and the third sector or between town councils and universities is almost non-existent in these neo-endogenous rural development projects. They hardly ever perform the important role of facilitator of these projects highlighted by (Furmankiewicz et al., 2020). The town councils within each LAG area organize a “share-out” of the LEADER funds that correspond to them without even considering the idea of developing common, joint projects with other councils or with other local actors. The fourth helix of innovation (Nordberg et al., 2020) is hardly ever used in these projects and even work in partnership between the three sectors is virtually unheard of (Edwards et al., 2001). Actions in collaboration with the third sector, such as attending to vulnerable groups in society, restoring local heritage, or recovering and disseminating traditions, are almost never contemplated (Cejudo-García et al., 2021). This also demonstrates the very limited leadership provided by local public authorities which is necessary for

these processes (Belliggiano et al., 2020 or Bowden & Joyce, 2018) (Belliggiano et al., 2020; Bowden & Liddle, 2018), given that in the initiatives and proposals analysed, other actors in the local community tend to be ignored. The private sector was only, very slightly involved in one of the projects we studied and, in the end, ended up withdrawing from the project due to the complexity of the process.

Our results also emphasize that size does matter. The municipalities with the smallest populations often lack sufficient resources, technical personnel and capacity to carry out large-scale projects and sometimes even relatively straightforward proposals. In addition to the objective data, these problems were also highlighted by the technicians of these councils in the interviews, in which they made clear that they were a source of great frustration and put them off participating. The provincial councils should perhaps play a more important role as facilitators and promoters of these projects in the small municipalities. Unfortunately, the provincial councils have tended to play a largely irrelevant role as creators of projects and as an economic support for the small municipalities, even though they have a much greater budgetary capacity and, of course, have representative functions and responsibilities for the small municipalities in their provinces.

We also noted that to some extent these projects are not related to the priority needs of the local community and instead are subordinated to the lines of action set out in the LEADER approach and the corresponding overall development strategies. It could be argued once again that top-down decisions and procedures are prevailing over bottom-up processes. In short, the interests of the community are being pushed aside to make way for those of the political powers (Biczkowski, 2020; Furmankiewicz & Macken-Walsh, 2016). The end result is small-scale public projects of little significance (Cejudo-García et al., 2022).

Lastly, there is a clear need for both endogenous and exogenous assessment as emphasized by other previous authors. A hybrid assessment would imply the extension of the neo-endogenous conception of integrated rural development to the practice of assessment. In other words, a good endogenous assessment would feed a good exogenous assessment (High & Nemes, 2007). The first-hand knowledge and experience of the actors who have taken part in the process is crucial in this analysis, as is the availability, quality and clarity of the direct sources.

In short, we can conclude that the LEADER approach and its application procedure must be updated and improved in three key aspects: simplifying the application process, in terms of both the volume of documentation and the exhaustive level of detail required; reducing the waiting time; and lastly advancing payment of all or part of the grant.

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The Projects that Might Have Been. Exploring the Reasons Behind the Failure of LEADER Projects. Reflections from the Local Action Groups in Andalusia (Spain)



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Abstract The LEADER approach can be considered the most successful rural development programme ever implemented by the European Union. However, there are various obstacles that have limited its successful application. These include, among others, programme bureaucracy, a low level of finance, delays in the payment of the grant, limited programming periods, top-down controls, and a lack of training and experience amongst promoters. However, the most worrying issue is the regression in many of the essential principles of the LEADER approach, which is causing local people to disengage from it and lose interest. Within this context, it is important to understand the difficulties faced by promoters and Local Action Groups (LAGs) when trying to obtain support for their projects from public funds. This chapter deals with the “lost projects”, the ones that never got off the ground, and the fundamental underlying reasons for the failure of these projects, according to the LAGs. Insufficient attention has been paid to the causes of project failure in the planning of subsequent rural development policies or even in academic research. Promoters have to skillfully manoeuvre through a long and complicated obstacle course. Projects can be rejected or abandoned at different times in the application process. The methodology followed in this chapter is based on qualitative research through semi-structured interviews held during 2021, in which interviewees were asked the following main questions: obstacles when applying for LEADER grants; causes of failure; if these projects were finally implemented without LEADER or similar support; and finally, specific emblematic cases. To this end, we interviewed technical staff from twelve LAGs in Andalusia, Spain. Failure was attributed to a highly diverse, complex set of causes, of which the most important were: insufficient initial finance; the complexity of the bureaucratic requirements, the slowness of the process; and poorly prepared projects. Our results suggest that the causes of failed projects would be relatively easy to correct, so transforming hostile “giants” into “windmills”. This would make it easier for promoters to complete the process successfully, so encouraging them to

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reengage in neo-endogenous rural development practices. In some cases, it is also necessary to convert “quixotes” into “sanchos”, to bring naïve businesspeople with overly ambitious, poorly prepared proposals down to earth.

Keywords Local Action Groups as facilitators · Causes of failing in LEADER projects · LEADER grant application procedure

1 Introduction and State of the Art

The LEADER approach is considered the most emblematic rural development practice implemented in the European Union. It was devised on the basis of recent theories of neo-endogenous rural development (Barke & Newton, 1997) and operates as both an approach and a method, nurturing development throughout the rural areas of Europe.

LEADER has the following specific characteristics: networking, territorial perspective, integrated and multisectoral actions, local decision-making, economic diversification, bottom-up approach, innovation (mainly social innovation), and the creation of public–private partnerships in the form of Local Action Groups (LAGs), in which local public bodies, private businesses and the third sector all participate. In this way, LEADER acts as a tool for participatory, endogenous local development (Van Der Ploeg & Renting, 2000; Woods & McDonagh, 2011), democratizing rural development (Ray, 1998), promoting decentralization, community empowerment and the renewal of social capital (Shucksmith, 2000; Farrel & Thirion, 2001; Ramos and Delgado 2003), so enabling rural areas to become more resilient (Nicolás Martínez et al. 2001).

This rural development initiative has been in operation for over thirty years now, since its launch in 1991 after the reform of the EU structural funds and the publication of the document “The future of rural society” (Commission of the European Communities, 1988). Over this period, it has taken very different forms. Between 1991 and 2006, it was considered a community initiative and was divided into three programming periods: LEADER I (1991–1993), LEADER II (1995–99), and LEADER + (2000–2006). After that, specific LEADER measures were integrated into the Rural Development Programmes of each country or region (2007–2013 + 2) and (2014–2020 + 3). Although LEADER has been generally quite successful, some authors have also highlighted its downsides, claiming that the objective of bottom-up participation has been difficult to achieve (Midmore, 1998); top-down controls have reduced local decision (Navarro et al., 2016); and LEADER is controlled by local elites (Esparcia Pérez, 2000), in which few members of the community are involved (Dargan & Shucksmith, 2008; Furmankiewicz et al., 2010; Shortall, 2008), so leading to the emergence of a “project class”.

There are therefore several key issues in the implementation of neo-endogenous rural development by the European Union (programme bureaucracy, a low level of finance, delays in the payment of the grant, limited programming periods, top-down

controls, lack of training and experience amongst promoters, among others). These limit the application of most of the basic principles inherent to the LEADER approach (innovation, participation, interterritorial cooperation, bottom-up approach, public–private partnerships and integrated approach). However, the most worrying issue is the *volte-face* in the LEADER approach that is undermining these basic principles and causing local people to lose interest in applying for rural development funds, so making it more difficult to carry out important projects for the development of impoverished rural areas.

In order to tackle some of these issues, it is important to find out more about the difficulties that promoters and facilitators encounter when seeking support from public funds for rural development. To this end, in this chapter we will be looking at the “lost projects”, the ones that never got off the ground, that failed in their application for rural development funds; the obstacles that prevent potential entrepreneurs from obtaining these grants; and the fundamental underlying reasons for the failure of these projects according to the facilitators, the technicians employed by the LAGs, who are key actors in the implementation of neo-endogenous rural development in rural areas. “Failed projects” are those that applied for support from LEADER, but ultimately were not executed with LEADER funds even though some received initial approval from the LAGs. Most of the research focuses on the 2007–2013 + 2 programming period because the following, most recent period has not yet finished. Insufficient attention has been paid to the causes of project failure in the planning of subsequent rural development policies or even in academic research. The causes and factors that prevent promoters from obtaining these grants have to be studied in all their dimensions so as to enable better planning and application of LEADER and similar neo-endogenous rural development schemes. In this way, we can breathe new life into the LEADER approach, reinforcing its original principles and encouraging local people to reengage with the initiative. In short, to learn from mistakes and failures.

Several previous authors have referred to these problems in the practice of neo-endogenous rural development (Esparcia Pérez, 2000; Navarro et al., 2016; Nemes, 2005; Ray, 2000). However, the final effects and the “wrong outcomes” of the LEADER programme have not been analysed in sufficient depth. The centralized bureaucratic system, based on ineffective institutions and procedures, imposes top-down controls and supervises the whole development process. Bosworth et al. (2016) highlighted the tendency of the LAGs to rapidly discard “ineligible projects”, i.e. those that did not fall within the confines of their overall strategies. They also noted the role of the LAG technicians as intermediaries who coordinate the initiatives, local assets and external requirements of the programme and the fact that official assessments of LEADER do not consider the accessibility to the programme. Other authors found that a high aversion to risk limits the innovative component of projects (Navarro-Valverde et al., 2022). For their part, Engelman et al. (2021) assessed the success or failure of LEADER projects according to their long-term survival and continuity.

And in our case, in an analysis of the LAGs in the province of Granada (Andalusia) over the period 2000–2006, Navarro et al. (2018) highlighted the following main

reasons for failure: poor project design by the promoters (26%), insufficient initial finance (14%); bureaucratic obstacles (22%); the availability of other types of grants (5%); and other or unknown reasons (16%). In order to reduce the high ratio of failed projects, the same authors (Navarro et al., 2020) pointed out the need for sufficient initial finance, the reduction of bureaucratic formalities, and the further development and more careful design of the projects.

2 A Long and Tedious Process

Promoters wishing to obtain LEADER funding for their projects have to be prepared to embark on a long and complicated process. Their project application could be rejected or abandoned at different times in the application process (Table 1). In fact, in the case of the Spanish region of Andalusia, more than half of the projects applying for LEADER funding in the 2007–2013 + 2 period were never implemented. Out of a total of 12,856 projects, 6630 (51.6%) failed, while 6226 (48.4%) were successfully executed (Navarro et al., 2020).

The project approval process has various important moments: (i) a provisional decision by the LAG, approving or rejecting the initiative; (ii) the definitive approval or rejection of the project by the LAG, once the Regional Government has declared the project “eligible”; (iii) signing of a contract between the LAG and the promoter formalizing the grant; (iv) the certification of completion of the investment by the LAG; and (v) payment of the grant (Table 1). This process usually takes more than one year, and, a further two years elapse after completion of the investment before the promoter actually receives the grant. The project can be rejected or abandoned at any stage of this process. This means that the projects have to undergo a long, complicated process, and there is no guarantee that the projects which finally receive the grant are the best ones (in terms of efficiency, sustainability and quality), the most innovative or the highest priority. The filter is, on most occasions, extremely tough and restricted. Some proposals are even abandoned at the beginning of the process before any kind of review is carried out.

3 Materials and Methods

The methodology is based on qualitative research through semi-structured interviews carried out during the year 2021, in which we sought to discover: (i) the main obstacles when applying for LEADER grants; (ii) the official causes of failure noted by the LAG technicians; (iii) the real ultimate causes of failure and/or rejection; (iv) if these initiatives were finally implemented without LEADER funding; and finally (v) specific, emblematic examples of each reason for failure. There is a platform (SEGGES) where the technicians can upload and share this information, but it did not work very well and did not include all the proposals. This is because after consulting

Table 1 Process of application for a LEADER grant

Steps in the application process	Key actor
<i>Grant application and resolution phase</i>	
Presentation of grant application	Promoter
Check to make sure that the activity/project has not started yet	LAG
Review by the LAG of the submitted applications and decision regarding their eligibility	LAG
Evaluation of applications and prioritization according to the selection criteria of the Local Development Strategy (LDS)	LAG
Provisional decision by the Board Committee: approval, rejection or placing on waiting list	LAG
Eligibility of the project. Grant report	Regional government
Technical–economic report	LAG
Approval or rejection of the project	LAG
Grant contract (acceptance of the grant)	LAG/ Promoter
<i>Justification and payment phase</i>	
Request for payment of the grant	Promoter
Certification of completion of the investment	LAG
Certification of expenditure	LAG
Payment of the grant	Regional government

Source Aljarafe-Doñana LAG (2013). Guide to the LEADER grant application procedure 2007–2013. <http://www.adad.es/files/Guia%20Rapida%20Tramitacion%20actualizada%20e1%203%20Julio%202013.pdf>. NORORMA LAG. <https://www.nororma.com/procedimiento-ayudas/> Saja-Nansa LAG. Flow Chart for the LEADER grant application procedure 2014–2020. The authors

the technicians from the LAGs, a large number of promoters decided not to initiate the formal application.

A total of 17 facilitators/intermediaries/policymakers (managers and technicians) were interviewed. They came from twelve LAGs (Alfanevada, Alpujarra-Sierra Nevada de Granada, Altiplano de Granada, Guadix, Los Vélez, Montes de Granada, Los Pedroches, Poniente Granadino, Sierra Mágina, Subbética Cordobesa, Valle de Lecrín-Temple-Costa, and Vega-Sierra Elvira) in four provinces—Almería, Córdoba, Granada and Jaén—in the Andalusia region in southern Spain (23.1% of the 52 LAGs in these provinces): (Fig. 1).

This chapter is structured as follows. We begin by looking at the obstacles in the fund application process. We then explore the official reasons for failure noted by the LAGs and compare them with the real, ultimate reasons put forward by the promoters. We then try to analyse the success or failure of these projects and whether they were eventually executed. This is followed by emblematic cases of failed initiatives and, finally, the discussion and conclusions.

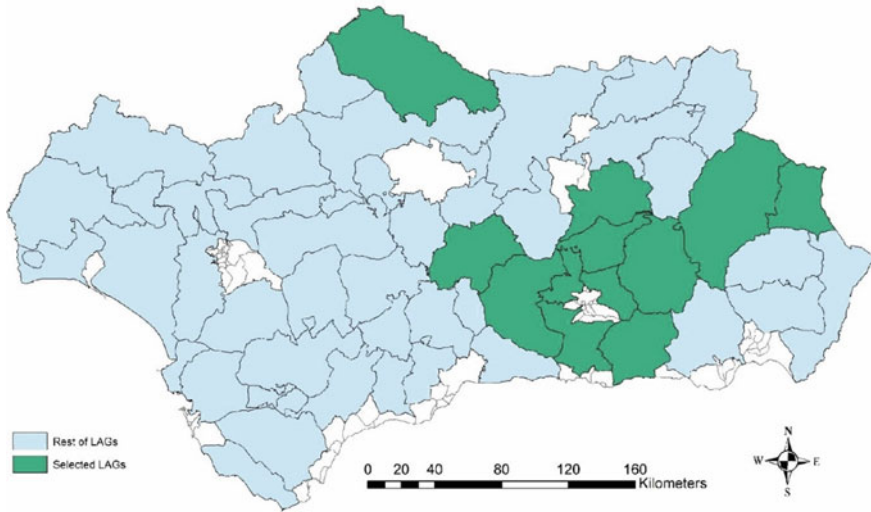


Fig. 1 LAGs that took part in the interviews. *Source* The authors

4 Results

4.1 Obstacles

In general terms, there were three main obstacles that complicated the grant application procedure, two of these were procedural (lack of initial finance, overly complex administrative and bureaucratic formalities) and the third was structural, produced by the ingrained, long-term problems facing rural areas such as remoteness and depopulation.

The first obstacle, the lack of initial finance, was considered a critical handicap to carrying out the investment (according to technicians from the Alfanevada, Alpujarra-Sierra Nevada de Granada, Los Pedroches, Los Vélez, Poniente Granadino, Subbética Cordobesa, Valle de Lecrín-Temple-Costa and Vega-Sierra Elvira LAGs). This affects mainly small/new entrepreneurs who do not have the initial capital required to begin the project. Banks often refuse to lend them the money, even though they have received initial approval for the project from the LAG (step 5). The grant is not received until the investment has been completed, and sometimes up to two years afterwards. This makes it difficult for small companies to carry out their projects and reduces the success of the LEADER approach (manager of Los Pedroches LAG). In the 2007–2013(+2) programming period, the LAGs negotiated with the banks to encourage them to provide the entrepreneurs with the necessary initial finance; however, this proved impossible in the next period, 2014–2020(+2), because the LAGs were no longer able to mediate between banks and promoters (manager of Subbética Cordobesa LAG).

A second important obstacle was the complex administrative and bureaucratic procedures (facilitators of Sierra Mágina, Los Vélez, and Vega-Sierra Elvira LAGs), with which many promoters were unfamiliar and found difficult to tackle. Many local actors, and even the professionals who handled their tax/paperwork, were incapable of working through and complying with all the various requirements in the different stages of the procedure (managers of Los Pedroches and Sierra Mágina LAGs). There were also complaints that small businesses had to comply with all the same requirements as large ones (i.e. a small family-run cheese factory compared to a huge, well-established cooperative). The same applied to large and/or small investments, even though the possibilities were totally different. In the last programming period, this administrative procedure proved even more complex because promoters had to apply for grants through a digital application (manager of the Subbética Cordobesa LAG).

Thirdly, the structural obstacles relating to rurality and depopulation reduce the opportunities for entrepreneurship. The low level of local demand, the lack of entrepreneurs, and the shrinking, ageing population reduce the number of opportunities for setting up a business. In the case of Los Pedroches LAG, the digital gap and Internet connection problems were also mentioned as issues that marginalized elderly people who were unaccustomed to using new technologies. According to the manager of this LAG, the distance or remoteness of some villages would not be a problem if applicants did not have to make so many trips to the provincial capital and other regional cities to sort out bureaucratic problems with the public administration. Additionally, the lack of banks, specialized professionals (i.e. industrial engineers, agronomists or architects), and childcare facilities force many rural entrepreneurs to leave their villages and move to larger towns and cities. Other interviewees, such as the technicians from the Los Vélez LAG, argued that rurality can be an advantage in certain sectors, such as the care of elderly people. At the same time, however, experts from the Sierra Mágina and Vega-Sierra Elvira LAGs argued that proximity to urban or metropolitan areas is an advantage, in that large numbers of entrepreneurs choose to move to these municipalities, and also a drawback in the sense that the LAGs have smaller budgets and the final grant received by local businesses is smaller. Within each LAG area, the deep rural municipalities with the smallest populations normally obtain higher grants.

Additionally, some interviewees claimed that regional government politicians and civil servants felt uneasy about public–private partnerships managing public funds, which, combined with the extreme variety of project types, made their execution more complicated.

4.2 Official Reasons Noted by the LAGs

Withdrawal of the promoter is the main reason noted by the technicians from the LAGs (Altiplano, Montes de Granada or Poniente Granadino). However, this generic cause hides other more specific reasons that can be classified into three groups: (i)

complexity of the process, (ii) insufficient attention to detail or incapacity on the part of the promoters, and (iii) a combination of the first two reasons. Obviously, there are not always hard and fast divisions between these different groups (Table 2).

Another important reason is the impossibility of obtaining financial support. In our opinion, responsibility for this must be shared by the LAGs and their incapacity of to provide the funding more quickly/in advance and/or the banks, which impose severe conditions on promoters seeking to obtain loans.

The complexity of the process was also reflected in other official causes: the impossibility of meeting project deadlines (steps 1, 5 and 11); the fact that at the end of the period, all the public funds had been spent (step 5); the search for other alternative grant programmes because of the limited economic attractiveness of LEADER and the complexity of the process (i.e. farm modernization grants, or grants for honey production for villages within national parks—Poniente Granadino, Guadix or Altiplano de Granada LAGs), a cause that was hardly mentioned; and finally, in the 2007–2013 + 2 period, some of the projects were rejected because these were presented at the end of the programming period when the LAGs had no money left, and they were kept in reserve (i.e. in the cases of Altiplano de Granada, Los Vélez, Poniente Granadino, Subbética Cordobesa or Vega-Sierra Elvira LAGs). As a result, the LAGs “invited” many of these projects to withdraw even though they were attractive and interesting (Guadix or Poniente Granadino LAGs).

Table 2 Official causes of failure ordered according to each of the steps

The complexity of the process	Problems with the promoter/ project	Combination of previous two
Unable to comply with project deadlines (previous steps 1, 5 or 11)	–	Initial finance impossible to obtain
–	Began work on the project before making the application (step 2)	
Lack of funds at the end of the programming period (step 5)	Irregularities in the documentation (step 5) Technically or economically unviable (step 5) Falls outside parameters of LDS (step 5) No innovative dimension (step 5) Project ineligible for LEADER grant (step 5)	
Search for alternative grants (due to bureaucracy and low amounts available from LEADER) (steps 5 or 9)		
	Report from the regional government declaring it unlawful (step 6)	

Source Technicians of the LAGs. The authors

Other reasons for failure included the promoter's incapacity to overcome the various obstacles and their lack of attention to detail. Examples include: starting the investment before presenting the application (step 2) (very rare, noted in one case by the manager of the Guadix LAG); irregularities in the application documentation (step 5); technical and economic infeasibility (step 5 mostly); incompliance with the objectives and purposes of the Local Development Strategies of each LAG (step 5) (Poniente Granadino LAG); applying for LEADER funds for purposes for which they were ineligible (step 5) (i.e. the purchase of tractors for farmers—Guadix or Poniente Granadino LAGs); the lack of any innovative component in the project (step 5); a report from the regional government declaring the project ineligible or unlawful (step 6); projects that were finally not executed due to economic problems (step 11).

In the following programming period (2014–2020 + 2), the regional government established a series of parameters to prioritize those projects that best fitted the Local Development Strategy—and its different supported lines—and discard those that were not directly related. This more rigorous selection process, especially at the beginning of the application procedure, meant that decisions on most of the projects were issued at the same time, and very few did not receive a grant.

4.3 Real and Final Causes

The causes noted are highly diverse and complex, and on some occasions, it is extremely difficult to find the final reasons for failure and the responsibilities of each actor. One of the most important was the lack of initial finance from banks (managers of Alfanevada, Alpujarra-Sierra Nevada de Granada, Altiplano de Granada, Los Montes de Granada, Poniente Granadino, Sierra Mágina and Vega-Sierra Elvira LAGs). Even the projects that had received initial approval from the LAG (step 5) had no guarantee of obtaining finance from a bank. New entrepreneurs with insufficient collateral rarely obtained the finance they needed from the banks. One of the policymakers in the Altiplano de Granada LAG remarked that most companies needed a loan to get the project off the ground, and if they did not receive it, the project was doomed to fail. Therefore, if the banks refused the loan, the project was abandoned. In the 2007–2013 + 2 programming period, the availability of loans was affected by the economic crisis and in the 2014–2020(+2) programming period by the COVID-19 pandemic. This had an inevitable knock-on effect on the success or failure of the projects. Extensive, ambitious projects fell by the wayside and only the small, less risky projects were carried out (manager of Sierra Mágina LAG). To avoid this, some LAGs reached agreement with the banks in their areas to provide loans for the execution of the projects for which initial approval for funding had been granted (step 5), in a bid to break out of the “vicious circle” of financing (LAGs of Altiplano de Granada, Montes de Granada and Sierra Mágina). After that, the funding contract was signed (step 9). It is important to make clear that most projects that received initial approval from the LAG were then able to secure a loan from the banks, although this process was far from automatic.

Another equally important reason that contributed to the demise of half of the failed projects was the complexity of the bureaucratic requirements and the slowness of the process, which sometimes took one or even two years, (Altiplano de Granada, Los Pedroches, Los Vélez, Sierra Mágina and Valle de Lecrín-Temple-Costa LAGs). Many of these projects were promoted by young or women entrepreneurs (technicians of Los Pedroches, Los Vélez and Vega-Sierra Elvira LAGs). It was particularly difficult for young promoters to wait for such long periods—more than two years—for their projects to be definitively approved (manager of Los Pedroches LAG). The relatively small grant they received did not compensate for such a high level of bureaucracy. As the manager of Los Vélez LAG explained: “entrepreneurs preferred to do it by themselves, avoiding bureaucracy and the slowness of the process”. This opinion was confirmed by the manager of the Vega-Sierra Elvira LAG, who said that: “they have to view the grant as a reward for their efforts, but they cannot hope to receive it until one or two years later. This is particularly difficult for business-people who are starting from “zero” with no economic support, and no chance of payment being advanced”. This is why some LAGs talked about a regression in the LEADER approach (Los Pedroches LAG). The increasing amounts of documentation needed and the time taken to approve and pay out the grant made it difficult to encourage people to get involved in LEADER. Also, in the end, promoters often received less funding than expected, given the investment, time and effort required. These factors inevitably dissuaded some potential entrepreneurs. For example, in a large project requiring an investment of about eight million euros in a restaurant, the maximum grant of 120,000 euros offered a ridiculously low level of economic support (technicians from the Valle de Lecrín-Temple-Costa LAG).

Additionally, the criterion that projects should have an innovative dimension often made them fall outside the lines established in the LAG’s overall strategy and brought them into conflict with different public administrations with responsibilities in different areas. These bodies could veto the project if it was thought that it might cause problems (e.g. Hydrographic Confederation or environmental issues—as happened in Los Pedroches or Sierra Elvira LAGs). Therefore, instead of promoting new businesses with innovative, creative projects, grants were awarded to already well-established companies and structures, which could spend the necessary time, comply with all the bureaucratic requirements and had sufficient resources to cover the initial investment. In short, the incentive to invest and innovate was totally undermined by the cumbersome bureaucratic process (Los Pedroches LAG).

Another important reason for failure was that some projects were poorly prepared and financially unviable. This issue was mentioned by several managers of different LAGs (Altiplano de Granada, Guadix, Poniente Granadino and Valle de Lecrín-Temple-Costa), who described such promoters as “people building houses of cards”, presenting applications without the required documents and formalities (i.e. business opening license or planning permission) (managers of Los Montes de Granada and Poniente Granadino LAGs). Sometimes, permission to open a new business was refused due to technical flaws in the application. The insufficient experience and lack of training of many entrepreneurs also contributed to the large number of poorly prepared projects (examples mentioned by the manager of the LAG of

Guadix). Another problem was that these promoters did not know how to comply with the requirements associated with the funding, with the different economic and financial issues, because they were not accustomed to dealing with “paperwork, or even worse, were not up to date with their tax obligations or other legal conditions”, and/or made little effort to solve these problems (managers of Guadix, Los Montes de Granada and Poniente Granadino LAGs). In short, when it came to processing grant applications and meeting all the related requirements, these small business-people or self-employed entrepreneurs were extremely dependent on external advisors and specialist civil servants (Andalusian Entrepreneurship Centre, CADEs). Female promoters usually presented better-prepared proposals and were less afraid of failure (manager of Vega-Sierra Elvira LAG). In the last programming period, applications had to be presented online through a web platform. This proved to be another obstacle for small entrepreneurs who were unfamiliar with IT platforms (manager of Sierra Mágina LAG). Rather than applying for what was quite a small, unattractive grant with which to buy new machinery, some businesspeople decided not to bother and to look for used machinery instead (Sierra Mágina and Valle de Lecrín-Temple-Costa LAGs).

In the case of public projects, most of which were presented by Local Councils, some proposals were buried once the local elections were over. Moreover, some town councils (such as Benalúa) were subject to a government-imposed austerity plan to help them balance their books and were not allowed to apply for grants of this kind (manager of the Guadix LAG). Another additional issue was the disputes between different political parties and between different levels of government (municipal, provincial and/or regional governments), which contributed to the failure of various projects (Guadix, Montes de Granada and Poniente Granadino LAGs). Furthermore, some LAGs did not approve grants for interpretation centres or museums because they did not fall within their overall strategies (manager of the Guadix LAG).

Finally, another much less common reason was the presence of “ghost” or “fake” projects, which were detected by the LAGs and rejected.

4.4 What Happens in the End? Are These Projects Finally Implemented Without LEADER Funding?

LEADER funding is important for most companies, and, in general terms, the project is abandoned if it does not receive LEADER support (manager of Sierra Mágina LAG). In fact, all the technicians interviewed shared the opinion that, in the end, few new, female and/or young entrepreneurs manage to execute their proposals without the support of LEADER funds: 5–35% approx.; Montes de Granada and Sierra Mágina LAGs: 5% of these; Valle de Lecrín-Temple-Costa LAG, 15–20%; Poniente Granadino LAG, 25%; Subbética Cordobesa and Altiplano LAGs, 35% of these.

This is not the case however with well-established companies, the majority of which finally carry out their projects, in spite of not obtaining LEADER finance

(managers of Altiplano de Granada, Los Pedroches, Los Vélez, Poniente Granadino and Vega-Sierra Elvira LAGs). According to the manager of Poniente Granadino LAG, this enables them to carry out their projects with their own resources, and at their own pace, so avoiding having to meet complex requirements, deadlines and bureaucratic obstacles imposed by the administration (manager of Los Vélez LAG). For example, rather than spending time and effort applying for a small grant for the purchase of expensive new machinery, they ended up buying used machinery “under the table” (Altiplano de Granada, Vega-Sierra Elvira, and Guadix LAGs). It takes a long time to obtain certain licenses and permits from the administration (Vega-Sierra Elvira LAG), which means that the only way to implement the project is to do it without LEADER funding, so avoiding the highly restrictive deadlines of the process. Another important factor was the amount of money to be invested in the project: “if it was 10,000 euros, it would probably be executed, but if it was 70,000 euros probably not” (manager of Sierra Mágina LAG). On some occasions, LAGs considered other aspects or added value, such as the participation of these entrepreneurs in joint projects such as the Territorial Quality Mark (mentioned by the manager of the Poniente Granadino LAG).

4.5 Emblematic Cases of Failed Initiatives

In this section, we describe various specific examples, according to the reason for failure, although, as mentioned earlier, it is not always easy to clarify the reason or the person responsible for the failure of a project.

For example, in those cases when it is **impossible to obtain financial support prior to the receipt of LEADER funding**, the responsibility is not always clear. On one occasion, the bank refused to give a well-known, profitable restaurant a loan during the economic crisis (2010–2013), even though the manager of Poniente Granadino LAG talked to the bank manager. As a result, they lost the grant, but the investment went ahead anyway, and today the restaurant remains successful with a large number of clients.

From the point of view of the **promoters**, some initiatives were rejected right from the beginning because they did not fit in with the LDS and/or the LEADER philosophy (step 5): i.e. a tractor or drinking trough for farmers (Guadix LAG); a slaughterhouse in which the lambs were to be brought from Portugal, instead of using local ones—segureño lamb with Protected Geographic Indication (Altiplano de Granada LAG); a palm-tree nursery (using non-local plant species); supermarkets, hairdressers, gyms or academies because they were not considered innovative in towns that already had businesses of this kind (Altiplano de Granada and Valle de Lecrín-Temple-Costa LAGs); or photovoltaic plants because they were in “fashion” (Altiplano de Granada LAG).

On other occasions, planning permission or other sorts of permits from the public administrations were refused, so forcing the promoters to abandon their plans (step

5). This happened, for example, with a project in which a day centre for elderly people applied for a grant to buy furniture.

As regards “fake, ghost or subsidy-hunter projects”, there were very few (technicians from the Altiplano de Granada, Poniente Granadino, and Montes de Granada LAGs), and the LAGs detected and rejected them at the beginning of the process (step 1) (technicians from the Valle de Lecrín-Temple-Costa and Guadix LAGs). For example, a project for building a small rural hotel, which in fact was going to be a house for the promoter’s son, was finally not accepted (Guadix LAG). Another fake project was detected by the manager of the Altiplano LAG at the end of the process, when they went to certify completion of the investment (step 11) and found an empty building where the work was still being done manually and the owner of the company had not made the promised investment in machinery (specifically, an olive-oil bottling machine). He claimed that this was due to a lack of communication between him, his financial advisor, and the LAG technicians. In another project, they applied for a grant for the construction of a balcony, but in fact ended up building a path (Guadix LAG), causing the grant to be cancelled. On another occasion, the promoter applied for a grant to buy a small crane for moving plants around at his garden centre, but the one he actually bought was much bigger than required.

Other promoters were unaware of the strict requirements involved in setting up their proposed business, for example, a catering company (Guadix LAG). In other cases, the projects were presented by companies in crisis, by entrepreneurs who had no knowledge of the sector in which they wanted to invest, who were trying to speculate with the investment, or trying to launder the money they planned to invest.

In other cases, the distrust in the LAG led some applicants to make several applications for the same project (Altiplano de Granada LAG). One promoter wanted to set up a winery and a shop for his son, but the LAG insisted that the project should involve participation in a wider network and they would not give him the grant unless he joined the Granada Wineries Association. This caused the son to impolitely reject the grant by telling the LAG to “stuff your money up your ...!” (Guadix LAG).

Other projects failed or were never implemented due to the **complexity of the process**, the **unattractive grant**, and the **unclear definition of the innovative nature of the project**. In one case, in Los Pedroches LAG, a honey production company applied for a grant to build a room/museum to publicize their products, trying to teach people about and promote its work through, for example, school visits. However, the project was rejected by the Regional Government. The reason they put forward was that the proposal did not fit in with the overall strategy in that it did not involve some form of productive business and was therefore considered ineligible.

Another example was an entrepreneur who wanted to open a sex shop. The LAG approved his application, as the project met all the necessary requirements and was innovative. The technicians issued a favourable report, but the project was then rejected by the Regional Government for political and ethical reasons (step 6) (Poniente Granadino LAG).

There are several examples in which the small amount of funding available led to the promoters abandoning their application. In one of these, a restaurant, the grant totalled 120,000 euros, a tiny percentage of the total investment of eight million

euros. For these promoters, it was not worth applying for funds, so they decided not to go ahead with their application.

On a more positive note, some potentially interesting **initiatives that might otherwise have failed were adapted in line with instructions from the LAGs**. The promoters were given the relevant training and then invited to try again. Examples include the Cave Dwellings Museum; Acci Asistencia (a project for buying electric bikes to encourage workers to use sustainable forms of transport); and training for promoters of small cheese factories or small hotels, whose dimensions and investment budget were redesigned (all from the Guadix LAG). In short, this enabled some good, interesting projects to be carried out, and the policymakers “provided a much more solid grounding for idealistic promoters with potentially attractive projects” (manager of the Guadix LAG). In the hotel project, the promoter’s daughter was trained to manage the business. In the cheese factory projects, training for the promoters was provided by the regional government, with the support of the Guadix LAG, thanks to which four small cheese factories were created.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

The interviews with LAG managers and technicians have enabled us to reach several conclusions as regards possible ways of reducing the number of failed LEADER projects. These could be classified according to the main actors involved or the application system/processes. Of course, this classification could be debated or reformulated because the differences between the different groups are not always clear-cut (Table 3).

As regards the **overall approach**, three key points must be noted. Firstly, the **return to neo-endogenous rural development principles**, improving the horizontal

Table 3 Possible actions to reduce the number of failed rural development projects

Actors/system	Actions
Process	Return to bottom-up neo-endogenous rural development principles and approaches
	Simplify the process and make it less bureaucratic
	Improve funding methods and increase the amounts available
Intermediaries/ LAGs	Role of facilitators, monitoring, mentoring and adaptation of projects
	Review the project selection criteria
	Efficiency. Establish clear project parameters and profiles to reduce the number of applications that are doomed to fail
Entrepreneurs	Training in new skills
	Improving the quality, the innovative nature, and the impact of their initiatives, adapting them in line with the corresponding LDSs

Source The authors

connections and the relationships between internal and external actors, and the specificities of the LEADER approach (Navarro et al., 2016). This will require the active participation of all local actors, not just established businesspeople (Cejudo-García et al., 2021). Social innovation must also play an important role in neo-endogenous rural development processes and initiatives (Bosworth et al., 2016; Vercher et al., 2023).

The second key demand is to **simplify the process and make it less bureaucratic**, a crucial issue noted by all the LAGs. All the different public administrations involved ask for different documents and requirements. If rural areas are to prosper, they need different rules and tax incentives (Los Pedroches LAG). Another negative feature that must be corrected is the top-down control system (bureaucracy and centralization), which increased in the last programming period. The promoters said they were tired of the countless number of obstacles and requirements. Another common complaint was that the rules and procedures changed from one programming period to the next, changes that affected both promoters and LAG technicians. The procedure must therefore be simplified, limiting the bureaucratic formalities and the documentation required from the regional government and the EU. Deadlines must be extended or made more flexible. Projects must take into account not only the timing of the different phases of social innovation processes in rural development (Neumeier, 2012), but also the actors, networks and innovations involved in these processes and the impacts obtained (Navarro Valverde et al., 2020).

Thirdly, the **financing of these initiatives** must be improved. The LAGs must have much greater resources at their disposal and the LDS in general must be better financed. In the case of the Sierra-Mágina LAG, an agreement was signed with the Caja Rural Bank that they would give promoters loans to finance their projects if it had been approved by the LAG (step 5). Also, if the project was approved, with a grant covering 40% of the total investment, private finance was easier to obtain and more secure. Therefore, the initial assessment by the LAG of the project's economic viability made it easier to obtain finance from the bank for the investment. In this way, the LAGs offered the promoters an "umbrella" that would cover them during this initial period (manager of Los Pedroches LAG). Money is not only required for the projects, but also for running the day-to-day business of the LAGs, which have to close between different programming periods, because they have no budget to keep their offices open. In general, more funds must be made available for the LEADER approach and these funds must be managed in a different way, with the promoter receiving at least part of the grant before or during the investment phase of the project (technicians from the Los Vélez LAG).

As regards **the LAGs, the facilitators**, they all emphasized the need for increased **efficiency by selecting and reducing the number of proposals** at the beginning of the process, so reducing much of their bureaucratic workload when processing the applications and speeding up the process. It would also help reduce the frustration of the promoters, a problem highlighted by Bosworth et al., (2016). This could be achieved by designing more selective Local Development Strategies, in a bid to reduce the strain on the LAGs who are short-staffed and struggle under the weight of

excessive paperwork. It makes no sense for a LAG to receive 120 applications, sometimes for grants for as little as 1600 euros, and fill in 600 pages of reports (manager of Guadix LAG). If the LDS were more restrictive with projects that offered little innovation, they could dissuade applications from promoters who present applications on the off chance of receiving a grant, on a “let’s-see-what-happens” basis. In the case of the Guadix or Vega-Sierra Elvira LAGs, the intention was to reduce the number of project applications by applying an initial filter: “if it does not fit in with the LDS, and its funding lines, it is better to prevent it from applying. The staff were snowed under trying to process 78 project applications. Better to have 25 applications and approve them all, in a bid to be more efficient and anticipate potential problems. Also, at the end of the programming period, do not encourage people to present projects, so avoiding frustration” (managers of the Guadix and Vega-Sierra Elvira LAGs). In the case of projects presented by local councils, a similar procedure was applied. With a total budget of 650,000 euros in heritage, a maximum of four projects could be approved. The technicians therefore invited some local councils to withdraw their application at the beginning of the process, in a bid to reduce the number of proposals from 14 to 4. The aim was to reduce the bureaucratic workload for the LAG staff, to enable them to have more time for promoting the LEADER approach and encouraging local stakeholders to get involved. The same happened with the environmental line of finance, in which funding for environmental projects was restricted to the most innovative (Guadix LAG).

This research also reflects the **extremely important role played by the LAGs and their staff as facilitators**, in dealings with entrepreneurs and, above all, with rules/budgets/deadlines. Their work as intermediaries, their assistance in training, mentoring and encouraging promoters is of crucial importance (technicians of Los Pedroches, Guadix and Valle de Lecrín-Temple-Costa). There is also an evident need to strengthen their financial autonomy to enable them to cover the entire programming periods, the times between periods, and to provide sufficient finance for the projects. The **LAGs** also do a very important job by speeding up the application process or by adapting projects to meet LEADER requirements, as noted by Cejudo-García et al. (2022). If the initiative deserves to be executed, one can be sure that the LAG will process it and support it (manager of the Guadix LAG), sometimes even by advising and helping promoters in their search for a more appropriate type of grant or funding. A very few minor problems of corruption have been detected in some LAGs. Unfortunately, these have led the regional government to increase the controls and bureaucratic requirements.

It is also necessary to **review project selection criteria**, in order to prioritize those that genuinely need and deserve support, i.e. by prioritizing the most innovative initiatives.

From the point of view of **promoters and LAGs, training and retraining** are vital for improving competitiveness and reducing the rate of failure of project applications (manager of Poniente Granadino LAG). To this end, support from the LAGs and other public administrations is crucial.

In conclusion, the causes of failed initiatives would be relatively easy to correct (Navarro Valverde et al., 2020), a question that could and should be resolved by the

different actors involved in the process: by the promoters themselves, the LAGs, the regional governments and/or the EU: insufficient finance prior to receiving the grant, excessive bureaucracy and the slowness of the process, and poorly prepared projects that must be developed in much greater detail. The application procedure also promotes social and territorial inequalities (Bock, 2016; Cañete Pérez et al., 2018; Nieto Masot & Alonso, 2017), which must be tackled and reduced.

It is therefore necessary to transform “giants” into “windmills”, to make it easier for promoters and rural entrepreneurs to complete the application process successfully, so helping rekindle their interest in neo-endogenous rural development programmes. At the same time, rural “quixotes” must be converted into “sanchos”, helping ambitious entrepreneurs with interesting, but ill-prepared, proposals keep their feet on the ground.

Future research will continue the search for the real underlying reasons for the failure of LEADER projects through interviews with the promoters, the ultimate “losers” in these “lost” projects.

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