




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 Arbuniel</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

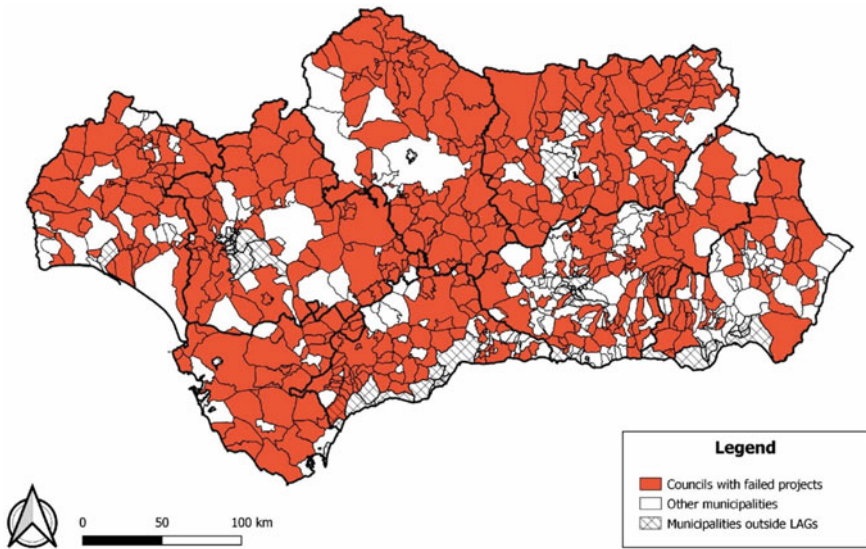


Fig. 1 Failed public sector projects within the LEADER approach in the rural areas of Andalusia for the 2007–2013(+2) programming period. *Source* Regional Government of Andalusia. Drawn up by the authors

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 (Belligiano et al., 2020 or Bowden & Joyce, 2018) (Belligiano 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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