



# A new hope for small-scale fisheries through local action groups? Comparing Finnish and Swedish experiences

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## Abstract

New forms of institutional support within modern multi-level fisheries governance are urgently needed to address the decline of coastal and inland fisheries. The EU-funded Fisheries Local Action Group (FLAG) initiative promises new hope to small-scale fishers by channelling support for the development of local fishing communities. This paper analyses the potential of FLAGs to contribute towards revitalizing small-scale fisheries in Nordic settings. Drawing on documents, surveys and interviews, we compare the implementation of FLAGs in Finland and Sweden. These countries were selected for analysis because they exhibit major differences in the implementation of FLAGs, alongside similarities in their coastal fisheries and social contexts. A special structural feature in Sweden is that FLAGs have been entirely integrated into Local Action Groups set up under the LEADER programme, an EU initiative that supports development projects in rural, coastal and urban areas. As a result, fisheries issues that used to be addressed by sectoral fishery groups are now subsumed into broader territorial initiatives. In Finland, the FLAG system still comprises independent fishery groups, which collaborate with LEADER groups. Our comparison of the two cases demonstrates the importance of dedicated institutional support for small-scale fisheries to enable them to access funding opportunities provided by the EU's FLAG initiative. Our comparative perspective enables conclusions to be drawn regarding the pros and cons of different approaches to the implementation of this hierarchical funding system, and the extent to which they can help restore fishers' self-reliance and benefit local fishing livelihoods.

**Keywords** Fisheries local action groups · Small-scale fisheries · Finland · Sweden

## Introduction

European fisheries management has made little progress towards addressing the social issues associated with the contraction of fishing activity over the past 30 years. The rhetoric surrounding fisheries policy still makes great play of the need to support the small-scale sector and maintain the viability of rural fishing communities on both national and EU levels (Symes et al. 2015; Urquhart et al. 2014). However, small-scale fisheries (SSF) continue to face severe challenges in many parts of Europe, as elsewhere in the world (Jentoft et al 2022). An extensive study of SSF in Europe (Pascual-Fernandez

et al. 2020) shows that a principal reason for small-scale fishers' distress is the malfunctioning of national and EU fisheries policies that, while emphasizing the importance of the SSF sector on paper, disregard their diverse needs in practice (Linke et al. 2022).

Small-scale commercial fisheries and their communities in the Nordic countries have experienced a continuous decline over the last half century, similarly to other parts of Europe. Although SSF still provide by far the most employment in the sector, they are ignored and marginalized by rigid production-led policies focused on industrial development, technical efficiency and market-based governance mechanisms (Pascual-Fernandez et al. 2020; Percy and O'Riordan 2020; Jentoft 2020). Governance instruments, whether regulative or supportive, are usually designed in collaboration with powerful lobby groups while excluding representatives of the SSF sector. Recent Blue Economy and Blue Growth agendas comprise measures to foster aquaculture and support industrial fisheries, accepting the decline of SSF

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and their communities as ‘collateral damage’ (Jentoft 2020, 396; Bennett et al. 2020).

Fishers operating in both coastal and inland areas now must deal with new interests, values and governance systems (Salmi 2015). This requires the development of new capabilities: entrepreneurship, information technology skills, co-operation and even political agency to defend their rights and interests. While small-scale fishers used to take pride in their independence and self-reliance, today they are increasingly burdened by micro-management regulations imposed by a bureaucratic machinery that ignores their needs (Hentati-Sundberg and Hjelm 2014). Since there is no turning back, it is important to focus on the potential for new institutional arrangements within the modern multi-level governance arena and consider how these may provide opportunities for reversing the ongoing decline of SSF. Although EU-funded Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs) have not always been successful from the small-scale fishers’ perspective (Bugeja-Said et al. 2022), we hold that this governance approach promises new hope for fishers and their communities.

Our central research question is: What opportunities do FLAGs provide for community-based initiatives to support local small-scale fisheries? Our hypothesis is that outcomes are dependent on how well the FLAG funding framework aligns to local circumstances and its success in connecting to other national and subnational organizations in the fisheries sector. To test this hypothesis, we compare the Swedish and Finnish cases. The comparative approach allows us to elucidate things that are usually taken for granted and explore issues rarely addressed by investigations of single cases or countries. Jasanoff (2005) notes that comparison can help explain heterogeneity in policy implementation among democracies and enable learning from different experiences. In our study, comparison sheds light on specific characteristics of Swedish and Finnish FLAGs and their implications. Revealing the similarities and differences between the two systems enables mutual learning that can enrich each country’s own perspective, as well as highlighting the diversity of FLAGs in different contexts across Europe (see Bugeja-Said et al. 2022).

In what follows, “[The EU’s FLAG initiative and its implementation](#)” section provides a background on the EU’s FLAG initiative. “[Small-scale fisheries and their institutional settings in Sweden and Finland](#)” section outlines governance arrangements for fisheries in Finland and Sweden. “[Results and analysis](#)” section analyses the results of the national case studies and summarizes differences and similarities in the implementation and outcomes of FLAGs in the two countries. Based on these findings, the concluding section discusses the future needs of SSF and the potential of different institutional arrangements to address these needs.

## The EU’s FLAG initiative and its implementation

Financial support provided within the framework of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) was initially intended, above all, to cushion the blow of the decline of fishing activity by mitigating its social consequences. In 1994, the Commission launched a new kind of approach—the PESCA initiative ‘... to assist coastal regions facing loss of revenue due to the poor economic performance of the fishing industry’ (Gallizioli 2014, 73). PESCA’s objectives of promoting sustainable development and an improved quality of life in coastal areas were taken up again in 2007 by FLAGs. This new approach differs from previous policy initiatives by providing support not to a single sector or group of beneficiaries, but rather to an area as a whole.

FLAGs are rooted in the European Fisheries Fund (2007–2013) and its Axis 4 provisions, which initiated a radically different and more nuanced and relevant approach to the future of coastal communities (Symes et al. 2015). Based on an analysis of the programming period 2007–2013, Phillipson and Symes (2015) suggest that FLAGs offer a compromise solution to the tensions that exist between the narrow sectoral approach of the EU’s CFP and the broader territorial approaches promoted by the LEADER program, enabling both individual and collective initiatives to prosper within a locally agreed development strategy. They note, however, that ‘as the LEADER experience has shown, forging local community partnerships and demonstrating tangible benefits takes time, and *FLAGs are only at the outset of establishing wholly new constituencies of interests*’ (Phillipson and Symes 2015, 356–357, our emphasis). Looking ahead to the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) 2014–2020, these authors envisage further opportunities for innovative development at the territorial–sectoral interface.

The FLAG initiative promotes a neo-endogenous approach that places local actors at the centre of local development and promotes their control over the process by restructuring local power relations (Miret-Pastor et al. 2020; de los Ángeles Piñeiro-Antelo 2020; Svets et al. 2021). In the second programming period of the EMFF (2014–2020), this approach has become known as community-led local development (CLLD) (Miret-Pastor et al. 2020). In 2019, there were 367 active FLAGs implementing CLLD across 20 EU Member States (ibid.). Each Member State defines its specific national aims, priorities and structures for implementation of the EMFF, and each FLAG develops its own Local Development Strategy (LDS), which is implemented by funding projects that address local priorities. Substantial diversity exists in the implementation of FLAGs among Member States across Europe, reflecting differences in political structures and local and national contexts. In some

regions, FLAGs have failed to deliver expected benefits for local SSF (Bugeja-Said et al. 2022). By contrast, results achieved by Finnish FLAGs, and of a collaborative transnational project led by Baltic Sea FLAGs, demonstrate their potential for revitalizing SSF that were previously left on the margins of fisheries and environmental policies (Salmi and Svells 2022; Salmi and Mellanoura 2020; Svells et al. 2019).

According to Budzich-Tabor (2014), the most characteristic feature distinguishing the FLAG approach from other local development initiatives are the partnerships between the private sector, local authorities and civil society organizations, which drive the implementation of area development strategies. Focusing on diversification and the multifunctionality of rural spaces, the approach locates the fishing sector at the centre of the local economy and considers ‘maritime identity [to be] a key resource of fisheries-dependent areas’ (de los Ángeles Piñeiro-Antelo 2019, 46). These CLLD initiatives contribute to the EMFF’s overarching aim of ‘increasing employment and territorial cohesion’ by pursuing ‘economic growth, social inclusion and job creation, and providing support to employability and labour mobility in coastal and inland communities which depend on fishing and aquaculture, including the diversification of activities within fisheries and into other sectors of maritime economy’ (EU 2014).

Ángeles Piñeiro-Antelo et al. (2020, 6) describe FLAGs as ‘planned organizations of stakeholders that operate to a formula of participatory democracy with the capacity for self-management and self-government’ within a governance framework ‘characterised by its flexibility to adapt to different contexts’. Thus, FLAGs can be considered as an alternative instrument of fisheries governance (Kooiman et al. 2005), based on an appreciation of the benefits of wider participation, collaboration and local involvement, in contrast to the hierarchical top-down decision making that is at the core of the CFP (Griffin 2013). In this paper, we focus on FLAGs as national level policy instruments; we examine the types of action and agency that they give rise to and assess their benefits for small-scale fishers.

Inspired by Phillipson and Symes (2015) analysis, we elucidate the role FLAG partnerships at the interface between sectoral and territorial development, which they refer to as a *middle way* of local development. We consider the extent to which the implementation of the EMFF 2014–2020 has fulfilled these authors’ expectations that ‘FLAGs may eventually have an important part to play in providing evidence of the resilience and vulnerabilities of fishing communities and in collectively campaigning at local and national levels, so that the wider economic and social benefits of sustainable fisheries are given due consideration’ (ibid., 357).

Our assessment of the opportunities for revitalizing local support for SSF with help of community-based initiatives

funded by the EMFF is based on a comparative analysis of the implementation of FLAGs in Finland and Sweden both at national and local levels. These EU Member countries were selected for comparison because they exhibit major differences in the implementation of FLAGs on a national level, alongside similarities in their SSF sectors and the societies in which they are embedded.

A particular structural feature of FLAGs in Sweden is that they have been entirely integrated into Local Action Groups (LAGs), which means that fisheries issues that used to be handled independently by FLAGs are now subsumed into the broader LEADER agenda for 2014–2020. By contrast, FLAGs in Finland are independent fishery groups, distinct from the local rural development groups (LAGs) with which they collaborate. Comparing the two country cases allows conclusions regarding the pros and cons of different national implementation approaches. Specifically, we ask whether these local bodies established under a hierarchical funding system can benefit small-scale fishers, restore their self-reliance and improve their livelihood prospects. Concrete outcomes with respect to these challenges are likely to depend on how the initiative is implemented, nationally and locally. Outcomes will depend, for example, on the degree to which FLAGs are connected to and embedded in existing institutional infrastructure, including fisher organizations and the governance systems supporting them. In this study, we focus on experiences from the second programming period of FLAGs (2014–2020), which is ending at the time of writing and use the distinction between territorial and sectoral development for a comparative analysis of approaches in Sweden and Finland (see “[Small-scale fisheries and their institutional settings in Sweden and Finland](#)” section).

## Small-scale fisheries and their institutional settings in Sweden and Finland

The decline of SSF is striking both in Sweden and in Finland, and in both countries fisheries-dependent communities have almost vanished (Linke et al. 2022; Salmi and Mellanoura 2020). In response to this decline, the FLAG initiative aims to revitalize local involvement and collaboration in fisheries issues. Local management of fisheries has a long history in both countries, where for centuries it provided the institutional framework for the regulation of small-scale fishers’ access to both inland and coastal waters (Salmi et al. 2022). Today, governance of Finnish and Swedish fisheries has become highly complex due to the coexistence of different, overlapping systems: governmental fisheries policy, local fisheries management, and public and private ownership of coastal waters (Bruckmeier and Neuman 2005).

Today, many Swedish and Finnish small-scale fishers, especially on the coasts, operate in public waters and are thus subject to regulation by national governance systems, while international agreements such as the EU's CFP also affect SSF directly in many ways. As decisions are made further and further away from local fishing waters, ensuring adequate representation of fishers' interests and values in decision making systems becomes of great importance (Linke and Jentoft 2016). During recent decades, the need for effective organizations to secure fishers' interests has become urgent (Linke et al. 2022), not least due to the rise of new powerful and partly competing stakeholder groups, including recreational fishers, tourism operators and nature conservationists.

## Finland

While the large-scale open sea fisheries in the Baltic Sea account for the majority of landings, 96% of Finnish fishers are small-scale fishers (Salmi and Mellanoura 2020). These fishers operate along the Baltic Sea coast and in the lake areas as one-person or family businesses, where fishing is usually one element of a pluriactive livelihood strategy that adapts to changing circumstances (Salmi 2005). Small-scale fishers have, for instance, adapted their fishing practices to the fluctuating seasonal availability of targeted fish species, and fishing is typically discontinued for the ice-cover period of three to six winter months. Seasonality and uncertainty of income mean that small-scale fishers cannot compete, in terms of scale of production, with fish farming and open-sea fisheries. Notwithstanding these challenges, Finnish small-scale fishing survives<sup>1</sup> and is appreciated as the continuation of a culturally important livelihood and a source of environmentally friendly natural products.

Since the mid-twentieth century, Finnish SSF have become increasingly marginalized, existing in the shadows of industrialization and larger industries within the natural resources sector such as agriculture and forestry, and languishing under the ever-tighter grip of non-local governance systems (Salmi and Mellanoura 2020). Employment in SSF has declined alongside urbanization, technological development and the industrialization of the society, but fishing livelihoods still generate notable economic and cultural value in many lakes and coastal areas. The *life mode* (Højrup 1983) of Finnish small-scale fishers is characterised by a life-long commitment to fishing, and pride in the independence made possible by the occupation (Salmi 2005). However, working

conditions created by transformations in society and governance systems are increasingly incompatible with the life mode of fishers (Salmi 2015). Moreover, the rise of hierarchical and multi-level governance systems and strict regulatory frameworks weakens the capacity of fishers to control their working environment and livelihood conditions. Fishers consider that their views, knowledge and values are not considered or even heard by those making decisions affecting their livelihoods (Salmi and Mellanoura 2020).

Traditional owner-based local management of Finnish fishing waters (Salmi and Muje 2001) is supervised by powerful regional fisheries advisory organizations and structured along the lines of agricultural organizations (Eklund 1993). The local decision-making body is a shareholders' association, which represents the collective interests of individual owners of water bodies. In Finland, where water owners' and agricultural interests have traditionally predominated, the voice of the large number of professional fishers, who typically do not own water, has been weak in comparison with other Nordic countries (ibid.). The tensions arising from this power imbalance continue today, although some coastal advisory organizations have taken measures to foster professional fishers' interests.

Given the established position of the regional advisory organizations and local shareholders' associations, FLAGS in Finland, as relatively new organizations, have searched for ways to collaborate with them. Additional partners may include commercial and recreational fishers' organizations. The latter proliferated in Finland during the second half of the twentieth century when fishing became a popular hobby. Commercial fishers are represented on a national level by the Finnish Commercial Fishers' Association (SAKL) founded in 1980. In the early years, the interests of large-scale fishing companies were emphasized (Salmi and Salmi 1998). Today, the SAKL includes many small-scale fishers among its members, and employs one person who represents fishers' interests on the national level. Inland fishers have their own voluntary national organization. Although these independent fishers' organizations play an important role in fisheries governance systems, as small players they cannot alone sustain the viability of fisheries livelihoods.

## Sweden

Unsurprisingly, the Swedish fisheries sector is more diverse and complex than in Finland, given the diversity of geographical, ecological (e.g. salinity) and socio-economic conditions in Swedish fishing areas. In addition to the inland fishery, coastal fishing occurs along the long, largely rural Baltic coast and on the more densely populated west coast, while marine fishers operate in the North Sea as well as in Skagerrak and Kattegat. Accordingly, forms of entrepreneurship, gear and vessel types and sizes vary greatly, as do

<sup>1</sup> In 2020, coastal commercial fisheries comprised 2276 registered fishers and there were 1637 registered inland fishers (Luke 2020). However, not all of these fishers are continuously active. Gill nets and trap nets are the most important fishing gear, while lake fishers also use seine nets and small pair trawlers (Salmi and Mellanoura 2020).



economic profitability, life modes and livelihood strategies (Salmi 2005).

Although hard to define precisely (Björkvik et al. 2020), the Swedish SSF comprises the majority of vessels and fishers in the fisheries sector.<sup>2</sup> However, it contributes less than 10% of the total value of landings (Waldo et al. 2020, based on data from STECF 2019). However, there is an increasing perception in Sweden that the political importance of fisheries generally (Eggert and Langlet 2020) and the socio-economic importance of SSF in particular far exceed their sheer economic value (Waldo and Lovén 2019), which differs greatly among regions (Waldo and Blomquist 2020).

As in Finland, the Swedish SSF sector has experienced a sharp decline over the past century. The number of fishermen decreased by 80% during the second half of the twentieth century (Neuman and Piriz 2000); this trend continued in the first two decades of the twenty-first century and has recently been exacerbated by the closures of both cod and herring fisheries since 2020 (Linke et al. 2022; for a historical perspective of the Swedish SSF decline, see Björkvik 2013). The decline, or in many places, disappearance of SSF is attributed to their inability to compete with large-scale fisheries, heavy regulatory burdens, lack of interest among young people, pressure on fish stocks caused by predators (seals, cormorants) and eutrophication, as well as diminishing political influence (Björkvik et al. 2020; Gillette et al. 2020).

The political and social predicament of small-scale fishers in Sweden is linked to deep-rooted, multi-level governance and governability problems arising from the failure to incorporate SSF values and interests in practical implementation on different levels (Arias Schreiber et al. 2019). A nationwide survey of fishers' representation in producer organizations (POs) (Gillette et al. 2020) found that the majority of small-scale fishers are not members of POs and no other influential organization exists to represent their interests. This exposes a democratic deficit in the governance of SSF in Sweden (Linke et al. 2022). While one organization representing SSF exists in Sweden (Sveriges Yrkesfiskares Ekonomiska Förening), it is rather powerless and unable to influence national policy and decision-making processes for various reasons (relating to capacity, resources, membership status, etc.) (ibid.). Lack of effective political representation impairs the ability of SSF and their communities to contribute to and exploit opportunities for change, which results in further marginalization, disempowerment and neglect of this sector (Arias Schreiber et al. 2020).

SSF and coastal communities suffer from political and economic marginalization in both Finland and Sweden. In

both countries, heavy regulatory burdens, and the failure to resolve conflicts with seals and cormorants have contributed to fishers' difficult and powerless position. The position of Swedish small-scale fishers is further complicated by competition with large-scale fisheries. In Finland, the small-scale fishers form a small and often marginal group compared to the more powerful recreational fishers and water owners and their organizations. In this context, FLAGs represent new, tailor-made funding opportunities that have the potential to revitalize SSF and at least partially restore their importance for coastal community development, as an alternative to existing patterns of coastal and rural development driven by unsustainable and/or unjust economic growth agendas (Arias Schreiber et al. 2020). The next section focuses on this issue by analysing the FLAG systems in Finland and Sweden and compares their outcomes for SSF.

## Results and analysis

Information on Finnish FLAGs (analysed in 'Finland' section) is derived from the report of a multi-method study for the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (Salmi et al. 2020). This study evaluated the implementation and outcomes of the Finnish FLAG system during the programming period 2014–2020. The material used for the evaluation process consists of 10 thematic interviews with FLAG managers conducted in 2019 and 2020, as well as responses to questionnaires sent to fisheries organizations, self-evaluation documents and interviews with fishers and other stakeholders. This varied material is well suited not only for analysing the general performance of the Finnish FLAG system, but also for assessing its effects on SSF.

Results for Sweden (analysed in 'Sweden' section) are based on 10 interviews with managers of seven LEADER groups supported by EMFF, conducted in 2020 and 2021.<sup>3</sup> Additional information is derived from informal communications with Swedish agencies and managers, and an interview study with 20 Swedish fishers which included questions about FLAGs/LAGs. The Swedish study also followed up on previous investigations of FLAGs (see Linke and Bruckmeier 2015). While this material does not correspond exactly to the results of the Finnish study, our approaches were adapted to the national contexts. The advantage of this approach was that it allowed us to focus specifically on the extent to which Swedish FLAGs have contributed to empowering small-scale fishers, from the perspective of LEADER board members, project owners and managers and fishers' representatives.

<sup>2</sup> Quantitative estimations of the relative size of SSF vary: while Waldo et al. 2020 state that 75% of vessels belong to SSF, Björkvik et al. 2020 assign 95% of fishers (530 out of a total 560) and 94% of vessels (730 out of total 780) to the SSF sector.

<sup>3</sup> See Fig. 2 below.

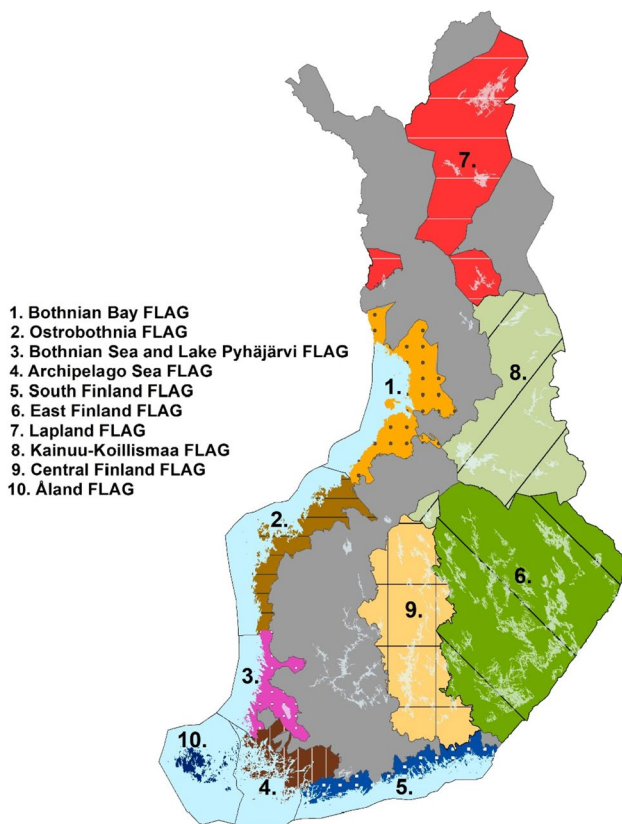


Fig. 1 FLAGs in Finland 2014–2020

## Finland

### National implementation

The FLAG initiative was launched in Finland under the European Fisheries Fund (EFF) programming period 2007–2013, when seven FLAGs in mainland Finland and one fisheries LEADER group in the Åland Islands were authorized by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. In the following programming period (2014–2020), the number of FLAGs increased to a total of ten (see Fig. 1). The local Parliament here is responsible for implementation of the FLAG the Åland Islands, reflecting their autonomous status. At a national level, implementation of the FLAG system, including the Åland Islands, adheres the framework set out by the EU in the EMFF.

Finnish FLAGs cover either coastal or inland fisheries except in one case where inland and coastal areas are included to the same FLAG (see Fig. 1). Each FLAG is administratively linked with a local LEADER group and this cross-sectoral connection is most noticeable in the sharing of administrative support costs, staff and offices. While remaining independent, the FLAGs can benefit from the long experience and extensive networks of the LEADER groups.

Although each FLAG is administratively linked with just one LEADER group, FLAGs may collaborate with several LEADER groups operating in their area, as described in the case study example of the Bothnian Sea and Lake Pyhäjärvi FLAG (see Box 1).

At a national level, the main development goals of Finnish FLAGs are (1) development of the local fisheries value chain, (2) development and dissemination of new practices and innovations, (3) prevention and resolution of conflicts, (4) improved collaboration and (5) promotion of local fish products (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry 2014). During the programming period 2014–2020, a wide range of local projects were funded by FLAGs, each targeting one, or in some cases several of these national goals. On the other hand, the objectives of each FLAG, as set out in their local development strategies (LDSs), reflect local circumstances and needs. Thus, local development goals only partly overlap with the national level goals.

The EMFF is the major source of funding for Finnish FLAGs. At the local level, this funding is complemented through contracts with local municipalities that invest in fisheries development through the FLAG concerned. Local municipalities may play an important role in supporting the FLAG as the example in Box 1 illustrates. The FLAG boards are responsible for choosing projects for funding that contribute to the respective LDS, while the regional fisheries authorities check the legal aspects and supervise their administration.

### Local implementation and its outcomes

The LDSs reflect regional characteristics and respond to regional needs, drawing on contributions from large numbers of local stakeholders. LDSs typically display a profound understanding of local fisheries and focus on promoting commercial fishing. Some FLAGs also fund projects that support aquaculture; however, the FLAG concept is foreign to many fish farming entrepreneurs. It seems that the providing support for small projects and networks is more compatible with FLAG objectives than supporting larger fish farming enterprises. In some cases, fishing tourism is mentioned in the LDS, or even highlighted as a focus area.

Funding directed through FLAGs accounted for 5% of Finland's EMFF funding between 2014 and 2019 and FLAGs accounted for 11% of the total number of Finnish EMFF funded projects (Salmi et al. 2020). With regard to project objectives, the issues most frequently addressed were 'fish, fisheries and harmful animals', 'educational measures' and 'harbours and other facilities'. Some projects were aimed at 'activation and development', which mainly refers to managers' salary costs. During this period, funding sources for FLAG projects in Finland included EU money (41%), state funding (43%) and other funding (16%) (ibid.).

Many FLAGs reported that they found it challenging to get municipal and private funding for their activities.

FLAG board members are chosen in line with general rules that are intended to ensure equitable representation of different interest groups (Box 1), and boards may also include some members nominated by LEADER groups and municipalities within the FLAG area. Board meetings take place on site, but also sometimes online or through e-mail correspondence when face-to-face meetings are impractical due to travel and/or time constraints. The project selection process and criteria for selection vary among FLAGs. However, all groups use scoring systems to ensure that projects contribute to LDS objectives.

Most FLAGs employ one manager, but some larger groups also have part-time assistant or have two managers. After two programming periods, many fishers and stakeholders in FLAG areas are still unaware of the existence of the FLAGs; however, many know the FLAG manager and are familiar with the work he or she is doing. The managers are often qualified in fisheries-related field, have expert knowledge of local fisheries and play a central operational role in the promotion of fisheries and building links between fisheries and wider society. One FLAG manager interviewed described his role as an interpreter, translating between the ‘different languages’ spoken by national and local level actors, e.g. the Ministry and the fishers. Most FLAG managers are well connected in local, national and international networks and all, except the manager of the Åland Islands FLAG, participate in a national managers’ network set up for the exchange of experiences, best practices and ideas. Linkages between FLAGs and the local LEADER groups have helped to disseminating new ideas and led to the adoption of new practices, e.g. peer auditing of projects and evaluation of their results.

Nearly all Finnish FLAGs focus on the development of fisheries livelihoods, but their approaches and outputs vary substantially. According to our evaluation of projects and manager’s activities, two coastal FLAGs (Bothnian Bay and Archipelago Sea) concentrate on enhancing local fisheries with little attention given to networking outside the sector. At the other extreme, three FLAGs (Ostrobothnia, East Finland and Åland) adopt what can be described as a more territorial approach and have developed strong cross-sectoral networks and partnerships. The approaches of remaining five FLAGs fall between these two (sectoral and territorial) extremes.

Apprenticeship projects produce concrete and measurable results for the FLAGs by recruiting and training young fishers and thereby directly contribute to the sustainability of local fisheries. These projects, although they have a sectoral focus, have generated new forms of co-operation between fisheries and the regional vocational colleges. Fishing harbour and fish processing facilities have been other important areas for sectoral development (see Box 1). Moreover,

many FLAGs have funded projects that improve training of commercial fishers and support the development of new fish products and marketing systems, as well as improvements to fishing technology (e.g. in Lapland).

In the coastal FLAGs, substantial effort and funding have been invested in mitigating the losses faced by small-scale fishers due to the increased numbers of seals and cormorants. In addition to smaller local projects, this problem is also being addressed by a transnational networking project (TNC) led by the South Finland FLAG. This Baltic Sea Seal and Cormorant TNC incorporates 14 Baltic Sea FLAGs in six countries. The project evaluated the effects of seals and cormorants for the fishing livelihood (see Svells et al. 2019) and focused on networking and lobbying within the Baltic Sea region and the EU.

Cross-sectoral co-operation, in the form of village level activities to stimulate fisheries and heritage projects aimed at locals and visitors alike, has been successful in the coastal Ostrobothnian FLAG and lake areas of the East Finland FLAG. The East Finland FLAG has contributed to projects promoting fishing tourism and—together with the LEADER associations—watershed restoration projects carried out by volunteers from the shareholders’ associations responsible for management of the fisheries.

It is often challenging to precisely assess the extent to which the FLAGs’ cross-sectoral activities benefit commercial fisheries. At best, they contribute to disseminating ideas and building networks and partnerships that support local fishing livelihoods by catalysing learning, collaboration and the adoption of new practices. Cross-sectoral partnerships create added value for FLAGs by harnessing the efforts of local people, institutions and LEADER associations. In FLAGs that adopt a sectoral approach, local fisheries benefit from their promotion of bottom-up decision making. Fishers’ concerns are listened to and may affect decisions on funding. SSF benefit from the outcomes of cross-sectoral projects, and from the FLAG manager’s work within the fisheries sector, although local fishers do not always participate in FLAG activities. This is the case in the Bothnian Sea and Lake Pyhäjärvi FLAG, which combines sectoral and territorial approaches (Box 1, see also Hultman et al. 2018).

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#### Box. 1. Outcomes of the Bothnian Sea and Lake Pyhäjärvi FLAG

The Bothnian Sea and Lake Pyhäjärvi FLAG is located in south-west Finland. This region is covered by five LEADER groups and includes 11 municipalities, with a total of 182,000 inhabitants. The coastal areas and Lake Pyhäjärvi are important areas for commercial fisheries and fish farming. Fisheries landings include about 50% of the Finnish Baltic herring catch and 500,000 signal crayfish, while about 1 million kilograms of rainbow trout are produced annually by fish farms in the region. In coastal areas, as elsewhere in Finland, grey seals and cormorants are commonly regarded as the main threat to fisheries livelihoods.

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The Bothnian Sea and Lake Pyhäjärvi FLAG is hosted for administrative purposes by the LEADER group Ravakka and employs one FLAG manager, financed by local municipalities. The management board comprises 10 persons, drawn, as in other FLAGs, from the public, private and third sectors,<sup>4</sup> in accordance with guidelines for equitable gender representation and geographical balance. While small-scale commercial fishers are well represented in the board (4 out of 10 members), organizing fishers' participation in the board meetings has been challenging due to time and financial constraints, since the expenses they receive do not cover their costs of participation.

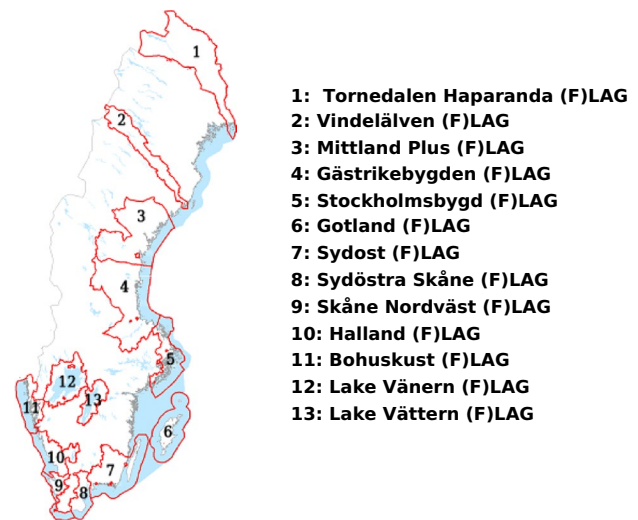
When interviewed, the manager pointed out that evaluating the FLAG's outcomes is difficult because of the multiplicity of issues affecting the SSF and local communities. In particular, the problems caused by seals seriously affect fishing livelihoods, and the FLAG's efforts are not as effective as they would be without the seals. There are some concrete benefits, however, for example from the provision of financial support for improved facilities in fishing harbours. FLAG-funded projects have developed new local fish products, including processing methods and direct marketing strategies, provided training for fishers and school children, tested new devices for seal hunting, and supported the development of fish-related tourism. This mosaic of small projects has prioritized promoting consumption of local fish, raising public awareness of local fisheries, and improving their image.

The population of small-scale fishers in the FLAG area is very small and dispersed. In this context, the Bothnian Sea and Lake Pyhäjärvi FLAG has played an important role in catalysing new networks and partnerships for fisheries development. In addition to enhancing cross- and within-sectoral collaboration, the FLAG directly benefits SSF through the support and advice provided by the manager to local fishers and other actors. This can include help in planning investments and submitting formal funding applications to the EMFF and the LEADER rural development programme. This support facilitates new investments and grassroots fisheries activities that would not otherwise be possible.

## Sweden

### National implementation

As in Finland, the FLAG system in Sweden was launched during EFF programming period 2007–2013, when it included 14 individual FLAGs (Linke and Bruckmeier 2015). During the subsequent programming period 2014–2020, all FLAGs were integrated into the organizational structures of LEADER following a decision by the Swedish Board of Agriculture that only one organization (LAG or FLAG) per area would be eligible to receive EMFF funds. This marks a departure from the first period in two regards: (1) Either existing FLAG boards had to be restructured to comply with stricter requirements regarding representation in the composition of LEADER boards, or FLAG member(s) were invited to attend existing LEADER



**Fig. 2** LEADER areas in Sweden with (F)LAGs utilizing EMFF funding in 2014–2020. These account for 13 of the 48 LEADER areas in the country; the map and numbering of the areas are based on information from the Swedish Board of Agriculture

boards, as representatives of fisheries' interests. (2) The narrow focus on supporting local fisheries gave way to a broader focus on rural development generally, where fisheries were only one of several interests. In the second EMFF programming period, 48 LEADER areas were operational in Sweden, of which 13 drew on funds from the EMFF and, of these, four were wholly reliant on EMFF (see Fig. 2).

A notable consequence of this shift is that, while the original FLAGs relied solely on EMFF funding, the new (F)LAGs<sup>5</sup> can potentially access up to all four separate EU funds available to LEADER groups (see Fig. 2 and above). This opens possibilities for funding fisheries-related projects within the framework of other projects that would not be eligible for EMFF funding, and hence increases the total amount of funding potentially available for fisheries projects. It is notable that Sweden receives 10 times more funding from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) than the EMFF for CLLD, and it has recently been argued that most, if not all, fisheries related projects can be encapsulated within EAFRD (SBA 2019). In general, however, existing projects relating to fisheries development have continued to be funded through the EMFF during the second programming period.

There are also important structural differences between the FLAG boards of the first programming period and the

<sup>4</sup> Representatives of non-governmental and non-profit-making organizations or associations.

<sup>5</sup> We use the term '(F)LAGs' for the Swedish case to indicate the integration of FLAGs into LEADER LAGs, meaning LEADER groups utilizing the EMFF during the programming period 2014–2020.



(F)LAG boards in the second period. In 2007–2013, the Swedish Board of Agriculture (SBA) required that the FLAGs should include representatives from three stakeholder groups, e.g. the public, private and third sectors, but individual FLAGs were granted some degree of freedom in appointing board members and there was limited top-down intervention. The integration of FLAGs into LEADER in 2014 introduced stricter representation criteria: apart from the three sectors, (F)LAGs also had to meet standards of representation with respect to gender, geography and age. The (F)LAG boards continue to be responsible for deciding which projects to fund or prioritize. Although their decisions are subject to SBA approval, which takes time and additional bureaucratic burdens, in practice, the SBA only rejects projects that fail to comply with administrative requirements.

The integration of FLAGs into LEADER marked another key change relative to the first programming period. While FLAG managers play a decisive role in Finnish FLAGs, Swedish (F)LAG managers seldom have a fisheries background and fisheries expertise must be supplied by board member(s) representing commercial fishers. Thus, the organizational linkages with grassroots fisheries organizations are much weaker in Sweden than in Finland. Success stories of EMFF funding strengthening local coastal fisheries in meaningful ways in Sweden seem to emerge out of contingent and individual factors, such as *the right person being at the right place at the right time*, rather than organizational or structural features of (F)LAGs.

The national development goals for EMFF implementation and CLLD in Sweden include the use of conservation measures and innovations to ‘promote sustainable fisheries and aquaculture’ and the diversification of fisheries businesses to include, for example, coastal tourism and ecosystem restoration.<sup>6</sup> While mentioning successes for local fisheries like the Stockholm City fish market, the description of operational aims does not emphasise measures to support fisheries, focusing instead on technical aspects of sustainable fisheries, such as the discard ban, handling of bycatch and the protection and restoration of marine biodiversity.

### Local implementation and its outcomes

Swedish (F)LAG boards typically consist of about 20 members, including three from the fisheries sector, representing commercial fisheries, recreational fisheries and aquaculture respectively. In contrast to Finland, recreational fishing in Sweden is within the scope of the EMFF. Commercial fishers and project owners we interviewed expressed worries

that recreational fisheries attract EMFF funding originally intended for commercial fisheries. They attributed this to the fact that the well-structured, powerful Swedish recreational fishers’ organizations fulfil the preconditions (F)LAG-funded projects. In contrast, the weaker organizations of Swedish commercial fishers, especially small-scale fishers, lack relevant structures to apply for and receive (F)LAG funding. Moreover, it is uncommon for individual fishers to be project owners.

Although all (F)LAGs promote fishery development, their diverse projects pursue a variety of different aims. Relative to Finnish FLAGs, there is a stronger emphasis on territorial development, as the LEADER agenda prioritizes cross-sectoral partnerships within a given region. Swedish (F)LAGs typically emphasize the role of fisheries as part of a larger whole, including both blue *and* green sectors, rather than focusing on fisheries in themselves. One interviewee explained this approach by stating that ‘...it is the place that needs to survive’, as opposed to fisheries as such (interview with FLAG manager).

The Swedish (F)LAGs adopt a variety of approaches. These range from sectoral approaches of LEADERs in Sydost, where fishing remains a relatively strong sector, and Vättern (a wholly EMFF-funded inland (F)LAG), to the strongly territorial approach of, for example, the LEADER in Stockholmsbygd, where development of local fisheries is firmly subordinated to the urgent need for restoration of fish stocks, which is framed as an ecological issue to be dealt using territorial strategies. Thus, the interplay between environmental factors, organizational factors (structures of representation of fisheries on (F)LAG boards) and contextual factors (e.g. strength of local fisher organizations) leads to a variety of outcomes (see example in Box 2). Not all (F)LAGs can demonstrate benefits for local commercial fisheries. Successful projects included those that promoted diversification and development of local markets, financed surveys of fish stocks and predators or focused on listening to fishers’ concerns. The last was a key component of a (F)LAG ‘flagship project’ in Halland to support commercial fisheries: *Ett utvecklat fiske i Kattegatt* (A developed fishery in Kattegatt).

(F)LAG representatives generally considered the integration into LEADER groups to have been a positive move, on balance, though many were reluctant to pass a final judgement. Proponents of integration argued that it was natural for fisheries to have ‘a seat at the table’ of wider development concerns; belonging to this forum for cross-sectoral development provided more benefits for fisheries than purely sectoral development under independent FLAGs. Although most fisheries-related projects were funded through the EMFF, the potential for strengthening fisheries by tapping into other funding sources was also regarded as beneficial as mentioned above (cf. SBA 2019). As one interviewee argued: ‘it’s a great advantage for the fishing sector to have joined

<sup>6</sup> See European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) Fact sheet Sweden: [https://ec.europa.eu/oceans-and-fisheries/system/files/2016-09/op-sweden-fact-sheet\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/oceans-and-fisheries/system/files/2016-09/op-sweden-fact-sheet_en.pdf)

this forum for rural development' (FLAG board member). However, some interviewees noted that LEADER constitutes a more competitive milieu for fisheries, where they have to coexist with other interests.

Projects that successfully address the needs of local fishers must be receptive to fishers' articulation of their needs, as shown by the example of the LEADER group in Gute (Box 2). Similarly, a large part of the success of the above-mentioned project *Ett utvecklat fiske i Kattegatt* can be attributed to the ability of project managers to broaden the scope of the project to address fishers' real needs, as well as the maintenance of informal ties with local fishers throughout the process.

Representatives of LEADER groups in Vättern and Sydost reported having close ties to local fishers. The situation in Vättern is rather unusual, since this lake is hosting only about 15 fishers, similar to each other with regard to catches and boat size. The representative in Sydost argued that the (F)LAG's ties to local fishers were the product of his personal efforts to build and maintain dialogue with fishers. The self-created role of this (F)LAG member in the LEADER group can be seen as a counterpart to the role of FLAG managers in Finland.

Summing up, while the integration of FLAGS into LEADER promises novel opportunities for cross-sectoral partnerships (collaboration among sectoral rural development projects) and for fisheries projects to access funds other than the EMFF, there is a risk that these integrated groups will overlook the specific needs of the fishing sector. This is compounded by the lack of strong organizations representing coastal fishers (Linke et al. 2022) with capacity to collaborate with (F)LAGs and take advantage of funding opportunities. Responses to our interviews indicate that contacts between (F)LAGs and fishers' organizations are infrequent. This is in contrast to the close links between (F)LAGs recreational fishers' association *Sportfiskarna*, which owns a large number of EMFF-funded projects. The case of the LEADER group Gute (Box 2) shows how, in the absence of structural linkages between (F)LAGs and local commercial fisheries, separate entities are required to enable local fisheries to access EMFF funding (see Box 2). The need for dedicated support for SSF, as a key part of coastal rural development, seems to go unrecognized in Sweden; moreover, recent policy discourse seems to be heading in the opposite direction, as in the recent evaluation of the EU funding programme by SBA, which discusses the option of substituting EAFRD for EMFF funding (SBA 2019).

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Box 2. Outcomes of LEADER in Gute

The LEADER group Gute is a (F)LAG based on Gotland, Sweden's largest island, located in the middle of the Baltic Sea. Like many Swedish (F)LAGs, Gute was originally a FLAG (2007–2013), which focused solely on fisheries development until integration of FLAGS into cross-sectoral LAGs in 2014. As a LEADER organization, its territorial development work potentially encompasses projects funded by all four EU regional development funds. The board of the LAG Gute consists of 20 members, representing the public, private and third sectors. The make-up of the board complies with guidelines on gender equity and geographical balance. Of the 20 members, two are formal representatives of fisheries interests.

The specific fisheries-related challenges of the area relate to the low profitability of SSF, which has led to a steady decline in the number of active coastal fishers on Gotland. Concurrent moratoria on traditional target species such as cod, salmon and eel seriously inhibit the ability of small-scale fishers to earn a living. At the root of these problems are ecological changes detrimental to fisheries occurring in the Baltic Sea, including rising populations of seals and cormorants, eutrophication, and declining fish stocks.

From the start, the LEADER group at Gute struggled to allocate EMFF funding to the fisheries sector due to a lack of funding applications for projects. This was perceived by managers as stemming from local fishers' lack of knowledge of this funding opportunity and the absence of organizations complying with requirements for submitting funding applications. The fisheries organization *Gutefisk Ekonomisk Förening* (Gutefish Economic Association, henceforth Gutefisk) was founded in 2015 to bridge this gap, following a period of dialogue initiated by the LAG Gute to promote closer relations between the LEADER group and local fishers. The aim of Gutefisk is to strengthen local SSF, in order to halt or, if possible, reverse their recent decline. Gutefisk has one representative on the LAG board (as one of the private sector members). We interviewed a LAG representative involved in fisheries issues, and representatives of Gutefisk.

Gutefisk channels the needs of the local fishing sector, as an intermediary for EMFF project applications. This has enabled EMFF funding to be secured for projects benefiting small-scale fishers on Gotland. Activities supported by these projects include the introduction of selective fishing gear, diversification of local markets, direct marketing, studies of nutrition and toxin levels in local fish stocks, and surveys of seal and cormorant populations. These projects are seen as steppingstones towards Gutefisk's goal of empowering the few remaining coastal fishers on Gotland.

Both, the LEADER representative and Gutefisk's representatives perceived the organization's role as being to ensure that fishers' interests were represented in the (F)LAG to ensure that EMFF funding benefitted the local fisheries sector. However, since Gutefisk itself had insufficient capacity and expertise to draw up successful project applications, it had to enlist the help of *Hushållningssällskapet*, a separate third-sector organization for rural development, to apply for EMFF funding through LEADER. *Hushållningssällskapet*'s costs are funded through the projects themselves (when a project is approved, part of the budget is assigned as administrative costs to the project applicant). The complicated organizational structure of involving LEADER, Gutefisk and *Hushållningssällskapet* requires a high degree of personal commitment on the part of the three actors involved in order to secure EMFF funding for the benefit of local fishers.

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## Comparison

### Territorial and sectoral approaches

Our comparison between Sweden and Finland builds on basic similarities like the relevance of the SSF sector for rural coastal development, impacts from ecological problems like seals and cormorants and challenges created by the multilevel governance systems for fisheries under the EU's CFP. Despite these similarities, our study reveals significant differences in the implementation and outcomes of FLAGs/(F)LAGs. Key differences between the two countries relate to project management and funding procedures, the degree of influence of different stakeholder and interest groups, and how managers personally influence opportunities to activate EU funding to support local fisheries.

In Sweden, the integration of FLAGs into cross-sectoral LEADER groups, where the fisheries are one sector among many, makes the (F)LAGs there more suited to territorial development approaches, compared to FLAGs in Finland. The (F)LAG approach in Sweden rests on the assumption that cross-sectoral partnerships, e.g. territorial development, are a better way forward for fisheries than focusing on fisheries development in itself. Many Swedish FLAG managers argue that having a seat at a 'larger table' is a defining feature of the LEADER concept as such. This is reflected in the makeup of (F)LAG boards, where only three of about 20 members represent the fishing sector and, of these, only one represents commercial fisheries.

In contrast, fisheries issues, and accessing funds to address these issues, are central to the implementation of FLAGs in Finland (as in most European countries, see Bugeja-Said et al. 2022). Many Finnish FLAGs appear to have found an appropriate balance between sectoral and territorial approaches, which enables local networks and activities to contribute to locally set goals for fisheries development. In Sweden, on the other hand, it is questionable whether and to what extent the wider territorial and cross-sectoral partnerships, drawing on multiple sources of funding available through LEADER, actually support the development of the SSF sector. The unempowered status of SSF relative to other sectors (Linke et al. 2022) has further exacerbated their marginalization within the broader LEADER agenda. This marginalization is reinforced by the (to our knowledge, unique) complete integration of (F)LAGs into LEADER groups in Sweden, where local fisheries' interests are increasingly outweighed by those of other, often more powerful, and better organized interest groups, such as recreational fisheries, aquaculture, tourism or conservation. This is not the case in Finland, although Finnish SSF are also unempowered and marginalized (Salmi and Mellanoura 2020).

In the case of the Swedish LEADER group Gute and the project Gutefisk (Box 2), the lack of a dedicated FLAG

manager focusing specifically on fisheries meant that ad hoc solutions had to be found to enable funds to be allocated to local SSF. The Gute LAG representative we interviewed was worried about the future, since many 'moving parts' needed to engage for these ad hoc arrangements to be successful in facilitating funding for local SSF. The same representative speculated that proposals to exclude the EMFF from funding sources for the Swedish LEADER programme in the next programming period could further disempower Swedish fisheries: 'Then, we'll *really* need people screaming "don't forget about fisheries!" Many will think that fisheries don't need support.'

In contrast to the strongly territorial approach in Sweden, the Finnish approach is more fisheries oriented. In Finland, however, major differences exist among the FLAGs regarding their degree of integration into the LEADER programme and other cross-sectoral partnerships. In Sweden, benefits for SSF appear to be dependent on the actions of skilled individuals who dedicate themselves to helping the (unorganized) fisheries sector in specific local settings. In contrast, in Finland, the FLAG manager usually has a fisheries background and is central to efforts to revitalize SSF. Moreover, small-scale fishers are represented in the decision-making bodies of Finnish FLAGs and can influence their activities, although many individual fishers do not take part in FLAGs and may be unaware of their existence. The independent life mode of fishers (see 'Finland' section) means that many are reluctant to get involved in organizations. Strengthening fishers' organizations would be beneficial, but only a partial solution to their problems, which are mostly caused by 'outside forces'. A more supportive policy framework and a greater awareness of their problems in wider society are needed to ameliorate the dire situation of small-scale fishers and provide new hope for the future. The role of FLAGs would then be to provide added value in the form of cross-sectoral partnerships that take advantage of these improved circumstances.

### Outcomes for small-scale fisheries

In Finland, FLAGs represent an opportunity to provide support for the struggling SSF sector and raise awareness of its problems, which partly compensates for the powerlessness of small-scale fishers to improve their own situation. In Sweden, this does not happen on a systematic level but only accidentally, in cases when favourable local circumstances (engaged and skilled individuals, funding structures, personal networks, etc.) align to enable the SSF sector to benefit from (F)LAG funding. In both countries, small-scale fishers' 'rugged individualism' (Percy and O'Riordan 2020) and their independent life modes restricts their opportunities to influence political systems that are not designed for them to participate in (Arias Schreiber et al. 2020; Linke et al.

2022). However, due to absence of dedicated support, Swedish small-scale fishers find it significantly more difficult to access (F)LAG funding than their Finnish counterparts.

One structural factor that affects the outcomes of FLAGs for SSF is related to the availability of organizations with the capacity to execute the projects, which is an important precondition for achieving successful outcomes. In Finland, projects may be owned by fisheries organizations (e.g. advisory organizations and regional research stations) or more cross-sectoral ones (e.g. educational organizations). In both cases, FLAG managers have good connections with these regional organizations. In contrast, the Swedish system lacks such ‘sectoral driving forces’ that could help the SSF sector to benefit from (F)LAG funding opportunities. As illustrated by the experiences of Gutefisk (Box 2), this hinges on local circumstances, since favourable structural features, such as organizations dedicated to supporting SSF, are largely absent.

Regarding the roles of different subgroups in the fisheries sector, it is noteworthy that recreational fishers have a powerful presence in the Swedish (F)LAG system, while they are mostly unrepresented in the decision-making bodies of FLAGs in Finland. In Finnish FLAGs, small-scale fishers are in a stronger position, because fish farmers and large-scale fishers rarely get involved. The stronger presence of recreational fisheries in Swedish (F)LAG may favour the funding of ‘environmental projects’ that mainly benefit recreational fishing.

## Concluding discussion

This study compared the implementation of Swedish and Finnish FLAGs to answer the question: What new opportunities do FLAGs provide for community-based initiatives to support local SSF? Although the aims of FLAGs are not limited to supporting SSF, systems in both Finland and Sweden are typically set up to provide support for partnerships that contribute to the development of the SSF and coastal fisheries sector in accordance with EU and locally defined goals. The Finnish case shows how the FLAG concept is, under favourable circumstances, well-fitted to the task of supporting the SSF sector, due to its grassroots approach and the integration of sectoral and territorial perspectives. However, Sweden’s unique approach to the use of (F)LAGs to implement the EMFF has not significantly improved the marginalized position of small-scale fishers and provides few opportunities for them to use these funds to further their own interests. The marginalisation of Swedish SSF partly result of the adherence by (F)LAGs to a fully integrated sectoral–territorial agenda, instead of being able to take advantage of opportunities provided by FLAGs to pursue a ‘middle way’ between sectoral and

territorial development (Phillipson and Symes 2015; see “The EU’s FLAG initiative and its implementation”).

The chief difference between the Finnish and Swedish implementation of the FLAG initiative confirms the hypothesis of our study: The Finnish system’s structured and targeted approach towards use of EMFF funding, channelled through individual FLAGs, offers new hope to the sector. This contrasts with the more limited benefits for SSF in Sweden, where since 2014 the specific purpose of this EU financing mechanism to support local SSF has been ‘watered down’ through the integration of (F)LAGs into the broader LEADER programme.

While the Swedish approach to the implementation of the FLAGs, and their non-beneficial outcomes for the SSF sector in this country, appear unique among EU countries (see Bugeja-Said et al. 2022), from a global perspective such downsides of failed policies for SSF are not unusual. Although most of the world’s fisheries are small-scale, governance failures have contributed to their marginalization (Chuenpagdee and Jentoft 2018). As noted in the Introduction of this article, existing fisheries governing mechanisms and new policies, like the Blue Growth and Blue Economy agendas, generally favour other interests and life modes rather than those of small-scale fishers (Pascual-Fernandez et al. 2020; Jentoft 2020). In Europe, the long-standing marginalization of the SSF has been allowed to continue, even though the socio-cultural, economic and environmental benefits of small-scale fishing livelihoods are recognized in policies and guidelines, on global (FAO 2015), EU and national levels (Linke et al. 2022). In the context of this need to transform the governance of SSF (cf. Chuenpagdee and Jentoft 2018), our study examined the potential of the EU’s FLAG initiative to contribute to such a transformation. The LEADER experience has shown that forging local community partnerships that yield tangible benefits takes time (Phillipson and Symes 2015). Despite this, the outcomes of Finnish FLAGs revealed by our study indicate that tangible benefits can be achieved. However, the limited success of the Swedish (F)LAG system in generating benefits for the Swedish SSF sector shows that beneficial outcomes from overarching EU funding schemes cannot be taken for granted. Instead, the outcomes must be investigated and assessed with respect to their national, regional and local contexts. The comparative approach of this study proved helpful for understanding the heterogeneity of EU policy implementation and highlighted the features of FLAG systems in the two countries. Some further questions remain: What lessons can be learned from these experiences that can enrich each country’s perspective? And how can lessons of these experiences at local and national levels be scaled up to provide inputs for rethinking the role of FLAGs in the next programming period (2021–2027)?



Our analysis shows that the FLAG concept can be implemented in diverse ways. While Finnish FLAGs to some extent adopt a sectoral approach, the Swedish system is based entirely on a territorial approach that ignores the sectoral perspective of local fisheries. However, a purely sectoral approach is insufficient to harness the potential of local and participatory governance, as it is unable to take advantage of opportunities for wider networking and community involvement (Phillipson and Symes 2015). Given the inherently territorial focus of LEADER organizations, it appears that a well-articulated sectoral strategy is still needed to achieve a ‘middle way’ that enables FLAGs to benefit SSF and their rural communities.

Organizational instruments like LEADER and FLAGs aim at fostering local democracy. In contemporary hierarchical fisheries governance systems, active participation of fishers and consideration of local needs and knowledges in decision making have become rare. In this context, the FLAG concept, with its focus on local participation, has raised hopes in the marginalized SSF sector. However, the Swedish case shows that favouring territorial implementation of (F)LAGs allows the interests and values of SSF to be overridden by those of other groups. In this case, (F)LAGs have limited potential to contribute to developing or revitalizing SSF. This highlights the need to address power imbalances and create a level playing field, as encapsulated in the concept of Blue Justice (Jentoft et al 2022). This will not happen automatically in the course of implementing ‘participatory’ initiatives in a situation where SSF have already lost most of their political influence and their standing continues to decline in the eyes of local people, governments, and the wider society. As our study demonstrates, measures are needed to promote participation of small-scale fishers and enhance their benefits from FLAG systems, alongside collaboration across sectors and within the fisheries sector. Efforts should be made in the coming programming period to enhance the capacity of FLAG managers to promote sectoral development, and to create new networks, cross-sectoral partnerships and funding instruments that provide “middle-way” opportunities to enhance the benefits for small-scale fishers.

We therefore conclude that there is a need for a better balance between territorial and sectoral approaches in order to harness the potential of FLAGs to open a path towards a greater recognition and improved governance of SSF.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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