



From development to power relations and territorial governance: Increasing the leadership role of LEADER Local Action Groups in Spain



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ABSTRACT

The establishment of Local Action Groups (LAGs) within the framework of LEADER with the participation of public and private actors through a bottom-up approach (i.e., the empowerment of local society) and the management of local development strategies constitutes one of the major innovations in the field of rural policy in Spain. The protagonism of local society and the local management of development processes entail the introduction and experimentation of previously unknown mechanisms of territorial governance. However, the efficacy of this rhetoric has been seriously limited in its practical implementation, with difficulties conceiving truly integrated and multi-sectoral strategies, increasing bureaucratization and the progressive exhaustion of local actors. Yet the factor most responsible for slowing the progress of LAGs and LEADER has been the conception and use of them as clientelistic and power instruments by local and regional elites (mainly composed of public actors).

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1. Introduction and objectives

As discussed in the literature, LEADER has seen two major innovations (Ray, 2000; Shucksmith and Shortall, 2001; Dargan and Shucksmith, 2008; Shortall, 2008). First, the territorial approach “by and for” the local population has been a factor in the empowerment of local society and a means by which to design and implement strategies and actions in rural areas from a bottom-up perspective. Second, LEADER provides a tool for performing such tasks: the Local Action Group (LAG). These innovations function—at least in theory—as instruments for the participation of local civil society actors, including social and economic stakeholders. From this point of view, LEADER performs a double function; on one hand, encouraging new governance for rural areas (Goodwin, 1998; Marsden and Murdoch, 1998) and providing a learning and capacity-building process for local society and its most representative or dynamic stakeholders. On the other hand, LEADER encourages the democratization of decision-making processes in local socio-economic development (Connelly et al., 2006), which were previously controlled almost exclusively by public actors. However, this conception of LEADER has not always been predominant from

the perspective of all rural actors because it has also been considered a scenario involving power struggles between various elites who have turned the programme in general, and LAGs in particular, into instruments of power.

In Spain, therefore, LEADER is not just a single programme devoted to the economic development of rural areas, as it has been seen by many stakeholders. Rather, it is a method that allows for the improvement of governance (implying social effectiveness) and the democratization of local societies, as local actors increasingly recognize and try to implement these modifications. LEADER is also considered an instrument of power relations, however, as many individuals within civil society and stakeholders at the margins of local power elites have argued, even despite the recognition that power relations within LAGs allow them to implement negotiations and agreements to improve problem-solving, as has been observed in many Spanish LAGs, especially during the last two programming periods (i.e., 2000–2006 and 2007–2013). Discourses among stakeholders in Spain adopt a differentiated combination of these three key basic conceptions: economic development, instruments for local governance and participatory democracy, and a power relations scenario. These conceptions will be analysed in detail in the following sections with particular attention to Spain.

Despite common elements, the situation and trends in Spain do not apply across other countries implementing LEADER. In fact, its two most outstanding virtues reside in a common philosophy and

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method, parallel to the flexibility of LEADER's implementation and adaptation to local conditions. As such, Europe is characterized by a high degree of diversity in the implementation of LEADER, as has been shown in the literature. For example, the European Network for Rural Development analysed three main models of implementation (ENRD, 2010a, b), the decentralization of project selection at the LAG level (i.e., Austria, Czech Republic, The Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Poland, some regions in Spain and Italy, etc.), the decentralization of project selection plus payment to beneficiaries (i.e., Wallonia, Luxembourg, Wales and England) and the decentralization of project approval (i.e., Portugal, Scotland, many Italian regions and some of the Spanish regions, etc.). Other recent studies also demonstrate significant variations not just in the implementation models, but also in the ways in which each state and region adapts LEADER to their particular circumstances (Bryden and Hart, 2004; Andersson et al., 2012; Falkowski, 2013; Granberg et al., 2015).

The next section presents an introductory review of the literature on conceptions of LEADER, both as an instrument to promote new rural governance and democratization processes and as a power relations scenario, in order to provide a context in which to raise the analysis and key issues for the analysis of LEADER in Spain (Section 2). The following sections are devoted to the central objectives of this research and a brief introduction to the methodology adopted herein (Section 3). The first main objective is to conduct an analysis of LEADER in Spain, paying attention to the weight and evolution of the three main conceptions—economic development, new rural governance and power relations scenario—and how they conform to co-existing discourses by stakeholders, differentiating that of power elites from that produced by stakeholders and civil society at the margins of local elites (Section 4). The second main objective is rooted in the analysis of the means by which Spanish LAGs have made improvements in relevant key issues such as territorial governance, the implementation of development strategies and the decisively leading (or contributing) role that management teams and their team leaders have had in the widely recognized success of LEADER in Spain (Section 5).

2. LEADER and Local Action Groups: between governance and power

2.1. LEADER as form of rural governance and democratization processes

Most scholars concur that LEADER is an interesting attempt to implement a new form of governance in rural areas (Moyano, 2001, 2005; Garrido and Moyano, 2002). A number of key issues of new governance were initially referred to other areas (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003; Rhodes, 1996, 1997; Stoker, 1996; cited by Goodwin, 1998; Sorensen, 2006); however, they remain fully valid for a territorial approach to rural development. In the analysis of rural areas, Stoker's main propositions on governance may thus be adapted and taken into consideration (Goodwin, 1998, p. 8, from Stoker, 1996). Stoker emphasizes first that governance involves a complex set of institutions and actors that go beyond the municipal government. Second, he argues that governance assumes the presence of networks of actors (i.e., public, private and social) who enjoy autonomy in decision-making. Third, Stoker contends that governance focuses on the identification of economic and social problems, beyond the boundaries that exist between administrations and organizations operating at a local scale. Fourth, governance allows the identification of dependencies and power relations between the institutions, organizations and actors involved in various actions (i.e., taking proper decisions). Finally, Stoker observes that governance recognizes that the ability to make

decisions and implement actions does not reside solely in the legal authority of public administrations, but also in the authority derived from the leadership of the institutions and actors involved in development processes (Bartol and Zhang, 2007; Beer, 2014).

LEADER's approach meets Stoker's propositions on governance, with at least four main principles to be highlighted. First is the contribution to self-governance based mainly – but not exclusively – on the expected implementation of local development processes, using mostly the endogenous potential of rural areas as a starting point for developmental strategies. Second is the theoretical and relatively high decision-making capacity of local actors (e.g., defining the boundaries of their LEADER regions, designing their strategic approach and managing and taking fundamental decisions in regard to the selected strategy). Third is inter-sectorial cooperation through networks and partnerships. Fourth – and complementary to the latter aspect – is integration, understood as the need to take into account all sectors of the rural economy as well as the involvement of all stakeholders; that is, the need for (effective) partnerships (Storey, 1999). All of these aspects, in relation to LEADER, are central issues for efficient governance, the implementation of which is a necessary – yet insufficient – condition for successful programmes.

In this context, LAGs provide a forum for partnership, networking and consensus building (Lee et al., 2005); in addition, they may play the strategic role of 'reflexive governance platforms' (Marsden, 2013). Their effectiveness could be crucial for programme success because competent networks of stakeholders (i.e., LAGs) are more able to identify innovative solutions to the various problems and needs faced by rural areas (Thuesen, 2010). The importance of networks and networking processes for rural development has also been noted in the literature (Lowe et al., 1995; Murdoch, 2000) as a key factor for the increase in social capital (Esparcia and Escribano, 2012, 2013a).

As elements of a democratic process, LEADER and its LAGs are in theory (and should be in practice) open to citizens (and stakeholders as representatives of the different sectors), allowing them to participate in voicing opinions, contributing to the diagnosis of problems and requirements, and designing development strategies (Ray, 2000). The presence and legitimacy of public representatives are rooted in elections. Therefore, LEADER legitimacy could originate with the fair representation of unelected actors (both private and social) and from the democratic mechanisms of LAGs and their boards. Furthermore, the legitimacy of this new rural governance is not automatic because the representativeness of social and private stakeholders may be open to discussion everywhere. As has been noted, however, legitimacy is continuously constructed through discursive processes and a complex mix of competing rationales (Connelly et al., 2006).

In spite of the highly positive aspects of LEADER in relation to rural governance, democracy, partnership and networks (including social capital), some observations must be considered from the perspective of the practical implementation of LEADER because it is also a scenario involving power relations – and sometimes power struggles.

2.2. LEADER as a scenario for power relations

As an instrument expected to foster local democracy, it is evident that LEADER has an initial democratic deficit as a number of LAG members, including some of those involved in boards, are unelected. Similarly, networks of governance, such as those derived from LEADER, are sometimes seen as undemocratic due to the delegation of decision-making power to public, private and civic stakeholders (Thuesen, 2010). On the other hand, the bottom-up approach of LEADER is far more heavily emphasized in the

literature, probably because it is the most novel. In its practical implementation, however, LEADER also has an important top-down component (i.e., the government approach). Many practical inconsistencies detected in the application of LEADER are due precisely to this combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches. However, these inconsistencies could be less important, and even disappear, with an increase in complementarities between the two approaches, as needed for the proper operation of programmes in general and LAGs in particular.

Nevertheless, probably the most fruitful interpretation of the 'negative externalities' of LEADER comes from the consideration of power as a matter of social production because it could be interpreted as the scene in which actors and institutions attempt to gain a capacity to act by blending their resources, skills and purposes into a viable and sustainable partnership (Stone, 1989; cited by Goodwin, 1998). Sometimes this intended viable and sustainable partnership responds to a paternalistic tradition; a situation which may explain the distribution and role of stakeholders in LEADER and its decision-making bodies (Goodwin, 1998). Frequently, however, new governance mechanisms are designed to ensure the continued hegemony of (some) local elites (Kováč, 2000; Kováč and Kucerova, 2006). This objective may imply a tendency to involve (especially in the context of a board) only the key actors belonging to or coming from specific elite groups (e.g., public, economic or civic, or a combination of these).

With regard to power relations in LEADER, three main types of discourse can be differentiated in relation first to the representation of different stakeholder groups (e.g., young people, women, politicians, etc.); second, to the territorial distribution of power within LEADER regions; and finally, to the assumption of LAG responsibilities (and power) in the face of national or regional governments and the underlying tensions that it could generate. Some thoughts about each of these aspects of the discourse help to illustrate an analysis of power relations in LEADER.

- i) Representation and power relations by different stakeholder groups. Some groups (e.g., women, farmers, and young people) are less interested in being involved in local structures for territorial governance (Shortall, 2008) or are not sufficiently organized (Thuesen, 2010), despite the fact that EU guidelines prescribe and support the broad participation of these groups (Böcher, 2008). In fact, experts have also questioned whether LEADER always contributes to the capacity-building of excluded individuals or groups, redistributing power to the less powerful (Shortall and Shucksmith, 1998; Shucksmith, 2000). On the contrary, some authors conclude that there is a tendency to favour those who are already more powerful or articulate (Nousiainen, 2015), e.g., those actors coming from the political side. As a consequence, those driving the process may construct obstacles to the inclusion or effective involvement of new actors in LAGs' boards (Thuesen, 2010). In those situations, the wider involvement of stakeholders is needed, as it contributes to the avoidance of elitism by the political class (Storey, 1999; Marsden, 2013), with particular attention to the inclusion, involvement and empowerment of those groups with marginal positions; aspects that remain among the key challenges for LEADER (Scott, 2004; Thuesen, 2010), particularly in the present period (2014–2020).
- ii) Territorial distribution of power within LEADER regions. This second discourse explains much of the tension and conflicts in regard to the scale of LEADER. Within LEADER regions, it is common that local elites from a small number of economically dynamic municipalities concentrate more power than local elites from other municipalities with peripheral

positions and very small amounts of power (Halfacree et al., 2002). In fact, an unbalanced territorial distribution of power among local elites is exceedingly common; an imbalance that tends to benefit those elites from the most dynamic municipalities (in spite of formal mechanisms to balance the distribution). As a consequence, territorial tensions are not rare within LEADER regions. Moreover, because the involvement of relevant actors coming from economic or civic sectors is not always common, territorial tensions within LEADER regions tend to be primarily of a political nature. Furthermore, political actors often move external tensions or conflicts into the board environment.

- iii) Assumption of LAG responsibilities and power in the face of national or regional governments, being part not only of the development and consolidation of the LEADER method process but also of the more general context of decentralization processes (OECD, 2006). In practical terms in Spanish LAGs, an important traditional source of tension and even conflict is the reluctance of certain officers in regional or national governments to allow local actors to take on responsibilities in public fund management (e.g., as a reaction to the fact that during LEADER I, most Spanish LAGs directly managed public funds, which later proved to be not completely legal). As a consequence, regional or national governments tend to limit autonomous steering at the LAG level (thereby limiting governance capacity at the LAG level), forming part of the classic rhetoric of LEADER. This type of situation was reported in Spain during the early stages of LEADER, as well as in recent years (Esparcia, 2000; Esparcia et al., 2001, 2015). Nevertheless, it is not completely unusual that the coexistence of bottom-up (LEADER) and top-down (national and regional governments) approaches generates some (even underlying) tensions, especially during the programme's initial stages. Meanwhile, the ongoing consolidation of the bottom-up approach is increasingly accepted by civil servants at all governmental levels. The complex relationship between local LAGs and regional or national representatives has also been illustrated recently in the early stage of LEADER in Romania (Kiss and Veress, 2015) and in relation to the high degree of control that the central government still exercises over boards at the LAG level (Csurgó and Kováč, 2015). In addition to tensions derived from daily management, these situations and discourses have not been generalized because most regional and national governments have been and are fully convinced of the need to foster and consolidate a decentralized and – as far as possible – autonomous performance of LAGs across Europe.

The aforementioned three discourses on power relations are not independent in practical terms, being present in many situations despite each discourse's varying predominance. In the following sections, a more detailed analysis of the particularities of LEADER in Spain is provided.

3. LEADER in Spain: research methodology

The qualitative assessment adopted in this study is based on two primary types of information sources, grey literature (i.e., mainly evaluations of LEADER in Spain) and a couple of focus groups specifically designed and conducted for this research. In addition, information derived from personal interviews with local stakeholders has been utilized; these interviews were conducted using a framework for comprehensive research on social networks in LEADER areas in Spain. Among the grey literature, it is

worthwhile to note first the Intermediate Evaluation of LEADER II in the region of Valencia (Esparcia, 1998) in which, in addition to quantitative indicators, two focus groups were conducted in each of the five LAGs of the region (differentiating beneficiaries and board members) as well as individual interviews with managers, board members and beneficiaries. Nevertheless, the evaluation, which allowed for a comprehensive view of LEADER programmes, was the final evaluation of LEADER II for the European Commission, of which the main author was in charge in Spain (Esparcia and Noguera, 2003). As part of this evaluation, interviews with the managers of a sample of 24 LAGs across the country were conducted, representing all regions and previously EU-defined typologies. These interviews were based on questionnaires including a complete set of evaluation questions following EU Commission methodology and orientations. Attending the information available, four of these LAGs were selected for in-depth visits in order to complete the evaluation, which included (i) individual qualitative interviews with managers and some board members and (ii) focus groups with beneficiaries and board members. In addition, being part of the grey literature, it should be mentioned that the analysis of the Spanish twin LEADER programme, PRODER (Plaza, 2005; MARM, 2012), as an example of the mainstreaming of LEADER, was conducted as part of the Evaluation for the European Commission (Esparcia and Noguera, 2004; Esparcia, 2006).

Other sources have been very useful in the main author's elaboration of a set of dissemination papers for the *Journal Actualidad LEADER*. Similarly, the *Journal of Rural Development* (edited by the former Spanish Unit of the LEADER Observatory, which became the *Journal Desarrollo Rural y Sostenible* in 2009 and is published directly by the Ministry of Agriculture) as well as membership on its editorial board from 1999 to the end of 2004 have served as useful sources, allowing for the identification and analysis of many LAGs across the country. Knowledge acquired from these sources and other related research (Esparcia et al., 2000, 2001; Esparcia, 2000, 2001, 2006), have enabled the authors to conduct a faithful exploration of the background of the LEADER approach in Spain.

A return to the recent situation of other grey literature has provided an initial comparative temporal perspective (ENRD, 2010a, b, 2011) that is yet insufficient for the purposes of this research, as the available information was highly fragmented and uncompleted. For this reason – and for this specific study – several focus groups were conducted in order to determine from primary sources the assessment of LAGs after more than 20 years of operation in Spain. Focus groups were conducted in October 2011 with team leaders (i.e., management teams) and LAGs' chairpersons.¹ Participants were identified through a selection process that took into account outstanding tasks of management, the performance of participants' own LAGs, their personal trajectory in dealing with these issues and deep knowledge of LEADER (being also very active in their involvement in regional and/or national LAG networks and/or the National Unit of the Promotion of Rural Development – the former National Unit of the EU LEADER Observatory). The total number of participants in both focus groups was 13. The first focus group involved seven team managers, with six chairpersons participating in the second focus group.

The organization and goals of the general research² focus groups had three clear drivers in relation to each of the seven topics under analysis: diagnostics, strengths and weaknesses. These drivers, as well as the topics under consideration, were previously known by participants. Topics were related to the following:

- 1) Origin, foundation and continuity of LAG structures;
- 2) Partnership (i.e., characterization with a focus on the balance among three main types of stakeholders – public, private-economic and private social – changes among periods of LEADER, representativeness and balance within the decision body);
- 3) Level of territorial integration and articulation (i.e., territorial representativeness within the LAG);
- 4) Presence and roles of women within LAGs (and in particular in the decision body);
- 5) Sectoral working groups promoted and/or sponsored by the LAG (or other instruments for local stakeholders' cooperation);
- 6) Management teams (i.e., size, professional profile, evolution and changes, adequacy of programme needs and strategies);
- 7) Institutional and social environment of LAGs;
- 8) Evaluation and self-assessment (as a learning process) of LAGs.
- 9) Continuity and sustainability of LAGs.

A number of more closely related topics were treated jointly in order to better facilitate the discussion. The methodology adopted by this study consisted of four main stages, starting with a brief presentation by the chair that addressed an initial diagnostic and the potential key issues for its analysis. Participants were then invited to individually and synthetically write down their views in a simplified matrix (i.e., topics by changes, strengths and weaknesses), emphasizing those aspects considered to be most relevant. On the basis of this material, the third step consisted of a structured round in which individual views (i.e., those topics that were discussed in several blocks) were shared, followed by an open discussion moderated by the chair in a consensus-building exercise. Finally, the chair presented a set of concluding remarks, dealing also with interrelations between topics.

During the approximate 3 h of each working session, the chair pursued a consensus-building agenda, both detecting the key elements to assess each main topic and the interpretation and assessment of those elements through their strengths and weaknesses as well as the situation, changes and prospects. Individual matrices produced by participants were collected, and audio of both sessions was properly recorded (and later transcribed). Using individual matrices, global matrices per topic were constructed without differentiating between those produced by LAGs' managers and chairpersons (due to the absence of significant variation between both groups). In order to validate the results, material summarising participants' views were sent to them and discussed through follow-up personal interviews with two additional external experts and two former managers.

This paper focuses on three main aspects:

- (i) LAGs as instruments of (mainly) territorial governance but also power relations;
- (ii) The role of LAGs, devoted (in theory) to the fair identification of problems, needs, designation and implementation of

¹ Participating members came from the LAGs of Navarra Media (Navarra), Rioja Suroriental (La Rioja), Los Monegros (Zaragoza, Aragón), Saja-Nansa (Asturias), Camín Real de la Mesa (Asturias), La Serena (Extremadura), ADECO Camino de Santiago (Galicia), INTEGRAL (Murcia), Condado Jaén (Jaén, Andalucía), Comarca de Guadix (Granada, Andalucía), Aprovelez (Almería, Andalucía), Merindades (Castilla y León). Three out of thirteen participating members were women, all of which were management team leaders.

² This research was specifically part of a wider request by the Ministry of Environment and Rural and Marine Affairs (MARM – Ministerio de Medio Ambiente, Rural y Marino-, 2012):http://www.magrama.gob.es/es/desarrollo-rural/publicaciones/publicaciones-de-desarrollo-rural/INFORME_LEADER_tcm7-233672.pdf [Accessed 20th March 2014].

adequate strategies, or on the contrary, the absorption of these tasks into LAGs' daily work;

- (iii) Management teams, whose functions involve the design and implementation of development strategies, but which are also frequently absorbed by daily businesses.

As noted previously, in addition to these main sources, information was gathered from interviews conducted according to the framework of a research project on social networks and territorial development in Spain, under way between 2009 and 2015 (SOCIRURAL).³ The amount of personal information collected in this project is very high (e.g., 600 interviews with local stakeholders in 11 study areas); however, it is used primarily to support the arguments and assertions developed in this paper.

4. Coexisting conceptions on Spanish LAGs and the conformation of power elite and non-elite discourses

LEADER has had a major impact in Spain in terms of geographical coverage and mobilization of funds (Moyano, 2005; Esparcia, 2000, 2006; 2009), as has been previously noted. A comprehensive recent study provides an extensive discussion of these achievements (MARM, 2012). Important progress has been made in the two major dimensions of LEADER; the diversification of economic activities (with the launch of a significant number of initiatives supporting the fragile rural economy) and the improvement of governance, social capital and social networks, and the empowerment of local society (Esparcia and Escribano, 2013a). None of these goals has yet been achieved, however, without tensions and power conflicts.

Our previous analysis of LEADER in Spain shows that power conflicts and tensions are frequent and are often latent in rural local societies (Esparcia, 2000; Esparcia et al., 2000, 2001; Esparcia and Escribano 2011, 2012; Esparcia et al., 2014). LEADERS, and more specifically their LAGs, are the primary scenario in which such conflicts arise with a high degree of intensity due to the control of available resources (those resources that inform decisions taken by LAGs), as has been recognized by many local stakeholders.⁴ Although in some indirect way, LEADER is conceived of as an instrument of power by many stakeholders, understanding power as the capacity for both the control of resources and decision-making in relation to these resources. Understood as such, "power" has been and is currently present in many situations in which local actors play different roles, ranging from the power relations of tacit consensus (i.e., to maintain compromises and equilibrium while available resources are shared according to some – not necessarily written – rules) to outright confrontation. As indicated in many of the personal interviews conducted in this study (Esparcia and Noguera, 2003; SOCIRURAL research project), former situations are widely represented; however, they usually mask some degree of domination–dependence relations rather than a fair equilibrium and consensus among local actors and society in relation to strategies, their practical implementation and the distribution of resources. As a consequence, one might conclude that one of the

features of LEADER in Spain lies in its frequent characterization as subject of – whether hidden or not – power struggles between different elites (Buciega et al., 2001; Esparcia and Noguera, 2003; Camacho and Esparcia, 2014), aiming to control LAG decision-making in regard to those resources provided by LEADER.

LEADER forms part of differentiated conceptions that have changed over time, however, partly depending on the presence, weight, or power of different stakeholder groups (known as 'competing rationalities' in the words of Connelly et al., 2006). To define those conceptions in the case of Spain, the qualitative information collected in the aforementioned research and official evaluations was used (including many interviews with managers and members of boards and the representatives of the Spanish nation-wide networks of rural development⁵). From the information gathered in this study, a simplified and roughly interpretative scheme could be drawn in order to represent the changing weight of conceptions of LEADER in Spain (Fig. 1). Three main simplified – and partly opposing – conceptions, were used, defined as follows: (i) LEADER is an instrument of power in the hands of power-groups within LAGs and their clientelist networks; (ii) LEADER is in essence an instrument with which to support the economic development of rural areas through local initiatives; and (iii) LEADER is a tool in the hands of local societies and their representatives within LAGs with the objective of jump starting governance mechanisms or their development for the promotion of social networking, capacity building, local empowerment and local democracy (that it so say, all those elements characterizing LEADER rhetoric).

All three conceptions coexist and could be complementary (even from the point of view of any individual stakeholder), especially those related to LEADER as an instrument with which to support economic development, governance and local democracy. These conceptions are long-established, targeted elements of LEADER discourses whose importance and trend-related changes depend on a combination of factors, including stakeholder group (e.g., politicians, entrepreneurs, environmental groups and other social actors), proximity to the start-up of a new programme, economic situation and even political changes at the local level. Nevertheless, with necessary cautions taken in interpreting the scheme, the findings of this study represent global trends spanning the almost 25 years of the LEADER method in Spain. Synthetically, four main stages can be differentiated. At the earliest stage, and in parallel to LEADER I (Fig. 1, A), the majority of local stakeholders saw LEADER primarily as an instrument of power and the control of funds and therefore ultimately susceptible to feeding clientelist networks. It should be noted that this view was associated with a high degree of traditional distrust among the rural population in regard to top-down policies or initiatives coming from abroad for a number of reasons, such as the limited nature of their impact, a generalized ignorance of what was new and the expected added value of LEADER. Many stakeholders therefore held the view of LEADER as another externally driven programme. In some regional governments, officials were partly reluctant to give competences to LAGs because from their perspective, LAGs were not sufficiently legitimate – from a democratic point of view – to manage public funds (Esparcia and Escribano, 2013b). Two additional factors explain that reluctance among officials: their narrow view of the implementation of public policies based solely on a top-down perspective and their hidden conception of LEADER as an instrument contributing to the maintenance of clientelist networks. Although the latter argument was much more present during the first stage of development, more recently, LEADER has also been

³ SOCIRURAL is a nationwide research study funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (DG Research), of which the author is the main researcher (see acknowledgements). Personal interviews to local stakeholders have been conducted in 11 LEADER study areas in the regions of Aragón, Catalunya, Galicia, Castilla and León, Castilla-La Mancha, Murcia and Andalucía. The most outstanding interviews have been transcribed, though they are referenced only partially in this paper. A comprehensive and systematic treatment of the information from those interviews is being done in other research. References in this paper are made either to these interviews or to the preliminary presentation of results.

⁴ Personal interviews from SOCIRURAL research project (2009–2015).

⁵ National Network of Rural Development and State Network of Rural Development.

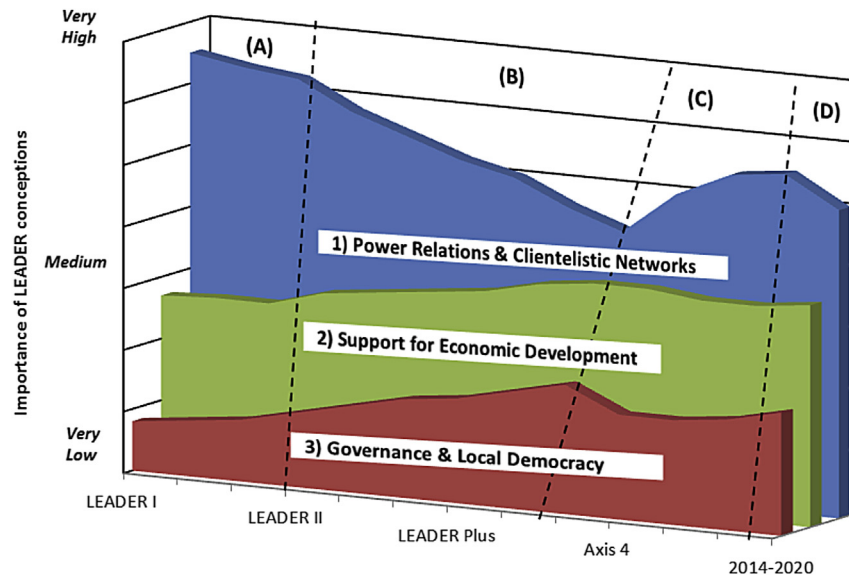


Fig. 1. Predominance of conceptions of LEADER over time.
Source: Updated and renewed by authors from Esparcia et al., 2001.

used by a number of regional governments as an instrument with which to promote or maintain clientelist networks.⁶ From this perspective, it is easy to understand why some regional governments have not encouraged rural governance and the empowerment of local stakeholders, at least during the early stages of LEADER.

Those who expected that LEADER might serve as a new and innovative instrument for rural development – that is to say, those who understood its great potential – were limited to a moderately sized but diverse group of people including some civil servants, officials engaged in extension services, environmental activists, experts, development practitioners and professionals whose careers grew out of an association with new conceptions of local development. The favourable and even enthusiastic reception of LEADER by some of these actors since its inception can also be attributed to their previous involvement in the initial design of a former national development instrument, the Programme of the Promotion and Development of Mountain Resources (Esparcia and Buciega, 1998; Esparcia and Estrela, 1991).

This heterogeneous group of individuals undoubtedly became increasingly involved in LEADER during the 1990s. As a consequence, the predominant conception of the programme in its initial phase (i.e., LEADER as an instrument of power) began to diminish with the advent of LEADER II and LEADER Plus (Fig. 1, B), in favour of a conception whereby LEADER was seen as a double instrument promoting economic development, governance and local democracy. Nevertheless, at the height of LEADER Plus, when regional and local actors were engaged in the design of what would become LEADER in the following period of Axis 4, positions furthest from that of the LEADER philosophy again increased (Fig. 1, C). In many rural areas, local (and even public regional) stakeholders intensified their pressure and control over LEADER. This newfound intensity was a clear sign that for local and regional elites, LEADER was still much more an instrument of power and clientelism than a tool to promote governance and local democracy, even given the

assumption of an economic development dimension. A final stage could thus be differentiated (Fig. 1, D), coinciding with the design of the new LEADER for the period 2014–2020. This stage is characterized by a moderate increase in the importance of those conceptions of LEADER as an instrument of economic development, governance and local democracy. The combination of increased bureaucracy during the period 2007–2013 and the important reduction of available funds managed by each LAG explains the moderate increase in enthusiasm over the economic potential of LEADER (Esparcia, 2009), despite the fact that entrepreneurs involved in small-scale initiatives were induced by the crisis to better consider even small co-funding coming from LEADER (Sánchez et al., 2014). The conception of LEADER as an instrument of governance and local democracy has recovered in recent years, coinciding with wide political change on a local scale in the wake of municipal elections in 2015. A change within the governing political parties in many municipalities (and as a consequence, the composition of public stakeholders for LAGs during the period 2014–2020) has recently been seen by local non-public stakeholders and experts as an opportunity to renovate procedures increasing democracy and reinforcing transparency in decision-making.

A regular pattern fully associating each conception with the discourse of a specific stakeholders' group has yet to be observed. Nevertheless, some tendencies have emerged; local actors tend to be identified with a differentiated combination of conceptions building up their own personal discourses. Taking into account the notion that local elite groups are usually composed of local politicians and private economic actors, some tendencies could be drawn from a simplification of stakeholders among both elites and non-elites (Table 1). The great importance of economic development issues should thus be highlighted for all stakeholders and members of a local population, as well as the low level of awareness among the local population in respect to new governance and democratization instruments that could be LEADER, or significant differences in the identification of LAGs as instruments of power relations and scenarios inspiring tension and conflicts. The latter conception is rarely recognized by local elites, though it remains a central issue for non-elites. Instead, elites recurrently show LAGs as organizations in which there are no confrontations guided by the

⁶ As has been denounced by the media: El País – Comunidad Valenciana: http://ccaa.elpais.com/ccaa/2013/05/22/valencia/1369248311_764047.html [Accessed 22nd May 2013].

Table 1
Importance of discourses to attending stakeholder groups.

Components of discourses	Elites	Non-elites
Economic development	High	Very high
New governance, local empowerment & democratization	High	Very low
Power relations, tensions & conflict	Low	Very high
Negotiation: agreements and consensus	Very high ^a	Very high ^b

^a Understood as democratic problem-solving.

^b Understood as non-democratic clientelism.

Source: Qualitative interviews with local stakeholders (SOCIRURAL Research Project, 2009–2015) and focus groups (2011)

“consensus” as a fundamental driver in decision-making, and consequently, as “an example of local democracy”.⁷ Nevertheless, although non-elites have agreed on the importance of negotiation within LAGs, that sense is fairly different because for those actors not belonging to the elites, negotiation and consensus are seen as clientelism and elites are identified as clientelistic networks.

The presence of strong alliances within LAGs' members (usually by local elites) therefore implies that both latent and hidden tensions and conflicts remain unsolved despite the supposedly more democratic way of decision-making based on (frequently artificial) consensus. The rhetorical goal of converting LAG as a global alliance of local actors is theoretically shared by all; yet in reality, different types of stakeholders' alliances are increasingly present, and consequently, (whether latent or not) power conflicts. Some form of preliminary and even informal agreements (based on real consensus) on the distribution of funds by sectors and/or municipalities is one of the detected ways by which to reduce or avoid those tensions and potential conflicts increasingly used in daily decision-making within LAGs. On occasion, these agreements are formalized through technical criteria for the selection of initiatives. Chairmen interviewed in this study agreed that assessing this factor was a fair way in which to ensure a democratic and territorially adequate distribution of funds by the LAG. Nevertheless, this procedure is viewed as not sufficiently democratic by non-elites, in addition to the belief that they could also hinder a comprehensive critical analysis of received proposals based on their quality, sustainability, creation of employment or multiplier effects.

To conclude this section, some precise statements should be made in relation to local elites. In theory, social stakeholders, entrepreneurs and politicians could be identified herein. However, local elites within Spanish LAGs almost ever include politicians, those who have traditionally tended to possess real control over decision-making (despite EU regulations limiting the proportion of public members), yet with the increasingly significant participation of private economic actors. Politicians have justified their decision-making power by citing democratic legitimization, arguing that the remainder of LAG members do not have such legitimization. Nevertheless, this situation changed formally over the course of the last period (2007–2013) because for example, the average of public members on decision boards during these years was 43%.⁸ Therefore, inclusion in local elite groups or alliances of local politicians within LAGs – even against civic and economic stakeholders (in a more or less crude way) – is not infrequent. On other occasions, territorial alliances between public, social and/or economic actors

from the same municipalities are the main driving force. Ongoing research on social networks demonstrates the coexistence of both types of coalitions; however, there is a tendency to highlight and emphasize those based on political elites rather than territorial coalitions (Esparcia and Escribano, 2012, 2013a, b; Esparcia et al., 2014).

5. Spanish LAGs: towards territorial governance through addressing territorial imbalances and improved functions

5.1. Territorial imbalances: progress and obstacles toward territorial governance

LEADER is seen as an innovation from the territorial point of view in most rural areas in Spain. Indeed, LEADER became an important reference from its inception in either those places without the presence of other institutional structures of territorial cooperation or those that were incipient or highly focused on other aspects (e.g., associations of municipalities for the collection of urban solid waste).

In parallel with the consolidation of the LAG as a partnership of public and private actors, during LEADER I and LEADER II, most LEADER regions were consolidated as a reference because they allowed for a better approach to socioeconomic problems and later, for the design of strategies and/or interventions aimed at the development of those LEADER regions. It is through LEADER that territorial identity has grown in rural areas (Esparcia, 2000) beyond the classical and traditional limits of municipalities (Table 2).

The poor development or implementation of other structures, or simply the lack thereof, has allowed LEADER to contribute to this territorial identity, creating a sense of belonging to a place. As such, poor development has also encouraged the structuring of rural territories, an outcome of critical importance to the provision of certain guarantees related to the implementation of strategies and interventions that necessarily should have a supra-municipal perspective. Advances in LEADER I and LEADER II continued in LEADER Plus, and with some exceptions, territorial boundaries were maintained. From the point of view of a number of stakeholders interviewed for this study (SOCIRURAL research project), these facts have contributed to the consolidation of power structures within LEADER regions that are currently dominated by local elites.

The formation of LEADER regions during the period 2007–2013, however, has undergone major changes in general with the growth in regional size. This change has caused a subsequent reconfiguration of power structures within these new LEADER regions (and consequently new tensions and/or power conflicts). Another negative consequence has been the regression of the previously adopted identity of the local population within LEADER territories, introducing distortions of this identity:

“Territorial demarcation of LEADER could mean the LAG death – or not. In Spain there should be an axiom and it is that territorial scope of a LAG should not be modified without the agreement

⁷ This trend has been detected in official evaluations (Esparcia, 1998; Esparcia and Noguera, 2003) and more recently in interviews with local stakeholders (SOCIRURAL research project, 2009–2015).

⁸ This figure rises to 47% skipping two regions with about 2/3 of public members (region of Valencia and La Rioja) (MARM, 2012). These regional governments introduced the weighted-voting to meet EU regulation, although as it has been pointed out “the preponderance of public members in the decision-making body, even having less weighted-voting, is a presence unconsciously coercive” (Sáenz, 2012: 72).

Table 2
Territorial imbalances and territorial integration. Main strengths and weaknesses.

Main strengths	Main weaknesses
1) LAGs have paid growing attention to territorial balance, being a basic criterion in their composition.	1) Often inadequate and/or artificial boundaries of LEADER regions managed by the LAGs.
2) LAGs have enabled advances in territorial identity.	2) Overlay of different administrative divisions at a supra-municipal scale, in addition to the LEADER, which hinders progress in territorial identity.
3) LAGs have contributed to the population's sense of belonging because it is almost the only supra-municipal structure (i.e., contribution to territorial articulation).	3) Progressive increase in the size of LEADER territories in successive programmes, complicating progress on territorial identity through LEADER.
4) The growing presence of LAGs in rural regions and recognition by the local population (i.e., legitimacy).	4) Increase in size of LEADER regions (LEADER Plus onwards) and the lack of correspondence with other administrative boundaries hinders mutual knowledge between actors and cooperation between them (civil society and private actors are increasingly less identified with new LEADER regions).
5) It is intended that all municipalities could have representation (albeit through private actors): the diversity of actors brings greater options for territorial representation.	5) Increase in size of LEADER regions adds difficulties for more efficient management: management teams led to administrative functions, decreasing or missing dynamization functions (having as a consequence the loss of contact with the civil society and its stakeholders).
6) Mechanisms to ensure presence or representation of the small municipalities (mainly through public actors): 'positive discrimination'.	6) Economic and social actors tend to come from the most dynamic and populated municipalities: imbalances in the representation within the LAGs.
7) Progress in the representation of social actors (e.g., associations) spread within rural regions, contributing to territorial cohesion.	7) Localisms by public actors are still present, frequently forgetting the general interest (they may cause tensions and conflicts in the boards).
	8) Despite recent progress, many remote or less populated areas are often still underrepresented in the LAGs or their boards.
	9) The mechanisms to balance the weight between municipalities of the LEADER region are sometimes insufficient.

Source: Compiled by the authors from Esparcia (1998), Esparcia and Noguera (2003) and mainly from Focus Groups with team leaders (management teams) and chairpersons of Spanish LAGs (Esparcia, 2012).

[of the actors in the LEADER region]. A regional government can't be allowed to do that within an office, whatever reasons they may have, being legitimate or not, [nobody from regional government can make the changes they want] and give it the name they like, because this procedure distorts the essential element of Leader. LEADER is a concrete territory where there are some citizens who agree in reaching a consensus on what are their problems and the solutions. If somebody changes the territory, he/she is broking the rationale of the performing of LEADER ... [in this regard] Area Plans (from the Act of Sustainable Development of Rural Areas [45/2007]) have made what they have wanted ... This is an example that this is not the way to define and establish the LEADER regions ... There is a natural tendency of all [national and regional] public administrations to do that because the consolidation of LEADER regions annoys them since these [consolidated] LEADER regions become power structures" [participant in Focus Groups of LAGs' Chairpersons, Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Medio Rural y Marino, 14th October, 2011].

Therefore, in a context defined by the fact that the enlargement of territorial boundaries does not favour these mechanisms of identification within LEADER territories, it must be added that growing difficulties should be faced by management teams in continuance of their role as facilitators in the LEADER region. This also contributes to the fact that in the wake of LEADER Plus, LEADER regions frequently ceased to be the territorial reference for many local stakeholders and members of the local population in comparison with the first three programmes. This is the case for private actors (who were forced to adopt a difficult reorganization if they wanted to be properly represented in LAGs and their boards); an especially serious scenario for the local population, which during the 2007–2013 period, has increasingly begun to see LEADER as a simple administrative office.

On the other hand, LAGs have sought, with varying success, to ensure the representation of all parts of the territory, e.g., through mechanisms designed to include the presence of smaller municipalities. Yet while representation has been achieved with regard to

LAG membership, one cannot say that such efforts have had the same success in the case of boards; even today in some LAGs, stakeholders from smaller or more distant municipalities do not feel they are being adequately represented:

"[large size of a LEADER region] is a conflict from the point of view of territorial balance. In addition there will be always a predominance of large in relation to small municipalities in the decision making body of LAG. This is a serious problem" [participant in Focus Groups of LAGs' Chairpersons, Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Medio Rural y Marino, 14th October, 2011].

In some cases, an attempt has been made to compensate for the under-representation of public actors with the presence of private actors. It is precisely in this last segment, however, that the most significant potential imbalances remain, given that economic and often social actors tend to be concentrated within the most dynamic municipalities (or at least those that are most dynamic and/or most willing to become involved in LAG boards).

Stakeholders have highlighted as a very positive benefit the maintenance of boundaries of LEADER regions because, through collective learning over time, LAGs have contributed to overcoming traditional localisms and strengthening trust between stakeholders – a process that is typically quite long:

"... internally [LEADER region] we are more appreciated and in relation to that evolution in which we have been consolidating, it has emerged a relation of trust between the LAG and the citizens and the organisations established in our LEADER region (especially those membership of LAG)" [participant in Focus Groups of LAGs' team leaders, Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Medio Rural y Marino, 14th October, 2011].

Changes in LAGs' territorial scope hinder this progress. Such changes occur with the design of each new programme (i.e., every six years); however, the period 2007–2013 was particularly problematic in many Spanish LEADER regions because of significant changes in relation to more stable previous periods (in addition to

newly established LEADER or PRODER regions, mainly coinciding with the LEADER II period). In addition to disturbances derived from territorial changes, changes to the political composition of public LAG membership also introduced a number of disturbances, and management team leaders participating in organized focus groups argued for “the introduction of mechanisms to avoid disturbances because political membership changes”. They agreed that reinforced and enlarged management teams, recovering prior strategic work (nearly lost due to insufficient size and growing bureaucracy) would be a successful means of diminishing such disturbances. Both team managers and chairpersons agreed on the strategic importance and costliness of building a shared social and economic development project, which previously required the generation of an important stock of social capital (in terms of trust and effective social networking within LEADER regions). From their point of view, this costly process was built up successfully until the advent of LEADER Plus but began to decelerate, even coming to a stop in the period 2007–2013 in some LEADER regions. Recent research shows that the removal of real LAG functions from regional authorities may even destroy previously generated social capital (Serrano, 2014).

5.2. Stakeholders' perceptions of LAG functions: from economic development to territorial governance

In Spain, economic development is certainly one of the most outstanding conceptions and clearly perceived functions (even by the local population) taken over by LAGs, as interviews with local stakeholders (i.e., SOCIRURAL research project) have shown. For members of LAG boards, this is also the most recognizable feature of LEADER and the best identified, surpassing functions related to governance, democratization, capacity-building and social networking (Fig. 1). Therefore, for LAG board members, the fundamental tasks of LAG basically consist of the identification of the problems and needs of LEADER regions and consequently the design and implementation of the most appropriate strategy to address them. LAG board members are aware that in order to undertake such tasks, they should properly identify available human, physical and economic resources, the potentialities of the LEADER region (e.g., territorial competitiveness) and the social and economic environment. The combination of these aspects directly influences the capacity of a LEADER region to gain competitiveness and improve its competitive position in the global context. In some way, when local stakeholders talk about economic development using the framework of LEADER they associate it more with a technical process than with the attainment of legitimacy, a process in which the participation of different local stakeholders is viewed internally as a way to ensure effectiveness in properly addressing the needs and implementation of regional strategy.

Therefore, the primary view among respondents is that as a technical process, in regard to tasks of diagnostics, surveying, prospection, design and implementation of development strategies, LAGs have (or should have) sufficiently experienced management teams and, where appropriate, the necessary external advice. Local stakeholders value knowledge of the territory and direct, permanent contact with civil society and other stakeholders highly, as these assets would afford LAGs greater capacity to manage the local development process as well as actions with which to respond and adapt to LEADER region changes. It has been compared LAGs with and almost without management team, demonstrating it strategic and fundamental role in the implementation of LEADER (Herraiz, 2014).

Stakeholders are nevertheless afraid of a number of uncertainties that may hinder the implementation of development objectives by LAGs. The first difficulty arises from the fact that

sometimes the detection of needs and the design of a relevant development strategy is undervalued, thus remaining almost as mere formality (as has been detected in previous evaluations, Esparcia and Noguera, 2003). Far from constituting a thoughtful, serious, participatory and methodologically rigorous process for the future of the LEADER region, the development strategy is frequently conceived of as a simple administrative document needed to obtain the programme and funds it entails. Stakeholders also recognize that with some frequency, following programme inception and funding, the document is virtually forgotten and decisions made are based, primarily on short-term criteria, marked or derived from the positions, pressures and power relations between different stakeholders within the governing bodies. Second, decisions may be based on criteria applied by those responsible for deciding on the eligibility of proposals (i.e., regional governments); and third, decisions may also be conditioned by proposals arriving from within a LAG which may not correspond with its initial objectives. In short, these elements may cause a deviation with respect to primary objectives and development strategies conceived as a mere formality. Table 3.

In this context, other weaknesses noted by stakeholders are related to the adequate performance of LAGs as instruments of development. Increased bureaucracy is one of the more negatively perceived issues, being highly criticized for the obstacle that administrative requirements entail coping with the fulfilment of animation roles and social and economic dynamization for which LAGs are theoretically designed.⁹ However, in previous programmes (LEADER I, II and Plus), the available human resources remained practically the same as in the last period (2007–2009), yet both administrative workload and the breadth of the territory have increased. In this context, the strategic functions of the LEADER method have been seriously damaged.

Having the conviction and commitment of stakeholders with the development of the LEADER region as a prerequisite, stakeholders argue for the provision of sufficient economic and human resources for LAGs in order to properly and effectively implement the development strategy and carry out animation tasks. Interviews in many municipalities (through the SOCIRURAL research project) have shown that in order to cope with this difficulty, politicians who are highly committed and involved in LAGs, possess significant responsibility in their local governments (mostly majors) and have local development agents tend to facilitate cooperation with LAG management teams that would otherwise have been inadequate (e.g., giving administrative information, technical advice or pre-processing applications).

Despite this positive attitude and the notion that LAGs should be a forum for participative democracy among stakeholders, the most common situation reported by LAG team leaders is the need to work in relative solitude, mainly because the perceived day-to-day role involves the processing, granting and management of applications as the fundamental part of the “development” objective. The coordination of both internal and external networking for daily tasks tends to be scarce, and as such, it would be important to move

⁹ These opinions were already present in the evaluation of Leader II (Esparcia and Noguera, 2003) and have not only continued but increased in successive programmes. Thus, it may be worth to show that in the evaluation of LEADER Plus, in the case study referring to the Valle del Jerte (Extremadura), the management team said to devote approximately 50% of staff time to administrative tasks and only a quarter to tasks of animation. Moreover, much of tasks relating to the assessment and management of projects and proposals meant that “excessive administrative bureaucracy of the program has as a result that the managerial team is constantly overloaded and without enough time to carry out the tasks of promotion and communication as they had planned” (Metis GmbH, 2010, p. 198). Most of the managers and team leaders, but also the LAGs' chairpersons participating in the Focus Groups conducted for this research, fully coincided in this opinion.

Table 3
LAGs as instruments for territorial development. Main strengths and weaknesses.

Strengths	Weaknesses
1) LAGs are (or may be) an instrument of governance and cooperation between public and private actors for the territorial development.	1) LAGs have sometimes failed developing shared and clear integrated and multi-sectoral strategies for the rural region.
2) LAGs have a good knowledge of problems and needs of the LEADER region.	2) Many strategies emerge from academic or technical studies rather than from a process of strategic thinking by local actors.
3) Increasing social legitimacy (arising from the ties between LAGs and the rural region as well as the representativeness of its local stakeholders in LAGs).	3) The functions of animation are increasingly limited by the administrative workload. Rural stakeholders perceived that LEADER has lost the initial potentialities of the LEADER method.
4) Cooperation within the LAGs (governance) allows shared medium and long-term territorial strategies.	4) The coordination with other public and private organizations could be improved in order to better design and implement the development strategies.
5) Experienced and effectively support management teams are available as support to the LAGs' boards.	5) The available financial and human resources are not sufficient to ensure an appropriate and effective development processes implementation.
6) The structure and characteristics of LAGs provide high adaptability to changes, even in the short and medium term.	6) To promote –frequently isolated- specific actions do not always meet the strategic objectives.
	7) The strategy may have little relevance for those who have to make decision on eligibility of specific proposals (regional governments).
	8) There is a growing loss of capacity by the LAGs applying an effective territorial development strategy.
	9) Sometimes there are designed strategies that can't be implemented, being necessary constant adjustments. Lack of mechanisms to update.
	10) Limited administrative capacity by LAGs to assume more responsibilities and functions on territorial development.

Source: Compiled by the authors from [Esparcia \(1998\)](#), [Esparcia and Noguera \(2003\)](#) and mainly from Focus Groups with team leaders (management teams) and chairpersons of Spanish LAGs ([Esparcia, 2012](#)).

towards a conception of LAGs as an instrument of real cooperation with other institutions or organizations in more effectively carrying out its development actions.

Given that cooperation and networking are so important, stakeholders recognize that in addition to the scarcity of (mainly) human resources, many LAGs face the problem of weak cooperation and networking cultures. In such a way, many Spanish LAGs are facing a contradiction derived from a strategic plan conceived theoretically as an instrument of territorial development within a strategic perspective. The implementation of such a plan is characterized by, in essence, its reduction to an increasingly scarce co-funding operation. Moreover, those actions do not always form part of the needed comprehensive development strategy (i.e., strategic plan) emerging from the agreement and commitment of different stakeholders. Stakeholders are fully convinced that fostering medium and long-term comprehensive development strategies is still one of the main challenges for Spanish LEADER during the coming years.

Fostering territorial governance (deep democracy, effective social networking, etc.) is the second strategic function of LAGs, though in comparison with economic development, this function is less valued and present in stakeholder discourses ([Fig. 1](#) and [Table 1](#)). Despite the fact that this aspect has been deeply developed ([Esparcia et al., 2015](#)), it is worthwhile to note some thoughts – mainly those highlighted by local stakeholders in regard to the strengths and weaknesses of this function ([Table 4](#)). For local stakeholders, the importance of territorial governance is derived not only from within but also from the framework adopted to promote the effective performance of other elements, such as the development strategies in LEADER. Local stakeholders claim that improvements and more effective territorial governance are needed because they condition and define the framework in which an economic development strategy is conceived, designed and implemented. From their view, effective territorial governance influences a set of positive aspects, such as increased stakeholder commitments and sense of belonging within rural territories; increased cooperative attitudes among the involved stakeholders; increased openness in collective development and social process involvement; and higher willingness to participate in territorial decision-making bodies, such as LAG boards. For local stakeholders,

those aspects affecting civil society, such as civil empowerment and local democracy, carry slightly less weight.

Therefore, in this context, stakeholders are convinced that LAG should be converted to a real and highly efficient instrument for territorial governance, networking and cooperation between public and private actors and organizations operating at the local level (or where applicable, the improvement of functions, although in general respondents agreed that there is still room for deep improvement), even as a precondition for addressing any action related to the “economic development dimension”. Stakeholders are also fully convinced that LEADER and its LAGs provide an excellent platform for the improvement of such territorial governance, promoting debate and even conducting a strategic prospecting, which may in turn raise democratic participation, involvement and the commitment of more local actors. In this sense, the strategic importance of LAG leadership, which (with some exceptions) has been significantly improved throughout the implementation of LEADER programmes, should be highlighted. These improvements can be attributed to increasingly experienced management teams in which team leaders are developing excellent leadership work, accompanying LAG boards ([MARM, 2012](#); [Esparcia et al., 2014](#)).

6. Concluding remarks: towards a comprehensive interpretative model of LEADER in Spain

LEADER as a method and LAGs as an instrument have certainly been one of the main innovations of rural development policies in recent decades in the European Union. Maintaining the traditional overall objective of economic development, LEADER has adopted a new method (i.e., the territorial bottom–up approach) and instrument to address it, empowering local stakeholders and local populations and giving them the capacity to design their strategic development programmes according to local needs ([Larsson and Waldenström, 2012](#)). LAGs were the instrument of this new approach, devoted to fostering and channelling civil participation in decision-making processes, encouraging democratization, promoting local governance and providing private and public local actors with capacity-building education.

LEADER has been enthusiastically received in Spain (as is demonstrated, for example, by the creation and implementation of

Table 4
LAGs as instruments for territorial governance. Main strengths and weaknesses.

Strengths	Weaknesses
1) Increasing representativity of all the interests of the territory (contributing to higher legitimacy).	1) Excessive weight of public actors (despite the nominal limit).
2) Growing presence of the most representative actors of the territory.	2) Insufficient involvement of economic actors and professional associations.
3) Growing presence of private actors (especially economic actors).	3) Insufficient articulation, representation and involvement of young people, women and social actors.
4) Increasingly incorporated into the debate between actors those aspects related to the development of the rural region (beyond LEADER).	4) Instability due to political changes after elections.
5) Development and progressive consolidation of the culture of consensus pact.	5) Lobbies bring into the LAGs their aspirations, problems and confrontations, including the traditional localisms.
6) Increasing relationships between public and private actors.	6) Lack of a project of medium to long term territorial development shared by public and private actors.
7) Growing consolidation of the LAGs in the rural region (more recognition and prestige among the local population).	7) Loss of autonomy with respect to regional governments. Sometimes associated to clientelistic patterns.
8) Increasing clearness on criteria for decision-making (limiting possible arbitrariness).	8) Culture of the consensus pact with tacit agreements can limit open debates and the effectiveness of fairer criteria prioritising actions.
9) Progress on clear and transparent criteria of eligibility and its application.	9) The presence in the LAGs of a large number of actors does not imply involvement in other all areas (in particular the decision-making).
10) High involvement and commitment from members of the boards.	10) Occasional obstruction to the renewal of LAGs members and their boards (wish of permanence).
11) Growing articulation of stakeholders participating in LAGs (especially important for social and economic sectors).	11) Increasing complexity in the organizational structures could limit LAGs' effectiveness.
12) Growing reputation and valuation of belonging to the LAG as a useful instrument for development.	12) Lack of commitment of many actors present in the LAGs (contrasting with the wish of belonging and permanence, especially from political actors).

Source: Compiled by the authors from [Esparcia \(1998\)](#), [Esparcia and Noguera \(2003\)](#) and mainly from Focus Groups with team leaders (management teams) and chairpersons of Spanish LAGs ([Esparcia, 2012](#)).

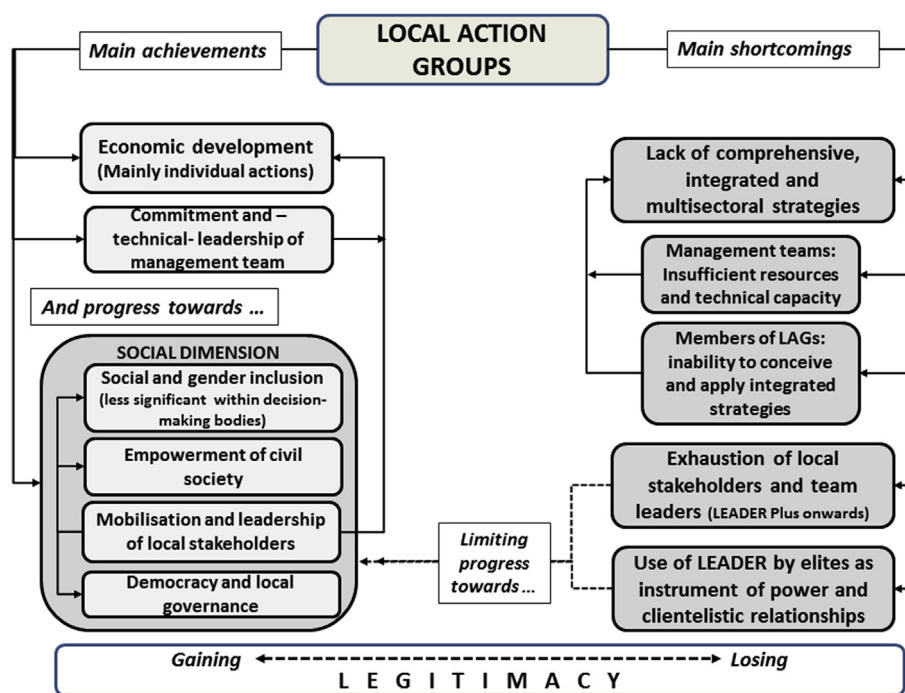


Fig. 2. Main achievements and shortcoming of Local Actions Groups in Spain.
Source: Authors.

PRODER, the twin programme of LEADER). Returning to the adaptation of Stocker's propositions on the governance of rural areas, it could be said that they are present in Spanish LAGs, but some gaps still remain between rhetoric and practical implementation, as is shown in [Fig. 2](#).

First, it could be said that after 25 years of implementation, Spanish rural areas are counted among an increasingly consolidated network of institutions and actors beyond the municipal scale and government, of which most are deeply involved in territorial approaches to local development. Nevertheless, from the

point of view of some actors, the involvement of elites and/or organizations responds much more to the dynamics of local power relations than to the fair commitment to deepening democracy in the framework of new governance. The presence of power elites should not necessarily be viewed negatively. In this sense, LEADER should contribute to the identification of dependencies and power relations between those organizations and actors involved, channelling them into cooperation, negotiation and problem-solving strategies ([Halfacree et al., 2002](#)). It is beyond doubt that important progress has been made within Spanish LAGs; however,

improvements in LAGs' accountability, transparency in decision-making processes and derived decisions are needed. The legitimization of LAGs needs not only to simply do things better but also to communicate how and why they have been done.

Second, in addition the aforementioned comments, LAGs are increasingly conceived of as an instrument for local governance in rural areas, beyond the traditional approach based on legal authority by local governments (Jordan et al., 2005). Clearly, many Spanish rural areas have experienced an increasing movement from government to governance and from legal authority to LAG leadership. The willingness of municipal governments and other organizations to participate and be involved in this new governance, taking the lead in a LAG's change processes, have varied over time and are diverse across the country depending on the presence of stakeholder groups in different LEADER regions. The conception of LAGs as instruments of power in the hands of elites is still very present in the minds of much of the local population, and although here again improved transparency and communication is needed, wider participation and social involvement by civil society as well as local leadership remains a strategic issue (Beer, 2014). Designing and implementing more integrated and coherent strategic plans are also effective future strategies, as well as better involving civil society and remembering that these plans are instruments not only of economic development but also of shared views of the territory's desired future. In addition, the most effective means by which to reach this future are through local governance, the empowerment of local civil society and the extension of democracy.

The Spanish experience shows earnest, important LAG leadership is needed in local society, particularly among management teams and their leaders. It has been found that LAG leaders frequently depend on management teams and increasingly, team leaders (Esparcia, 2015). Recent research shows that for the most relevant local actors in LEADER regions, team leaders reached a higher capacity to mediate and transmit new ideas or innovations (Herraiz, 2014; Serrano, 2014). In addition, globally, they are held in highest regard by social networks – many times more than those among whom political power is concentrated. This trend is an example of the notion that governing does not mean governance and that governance is supported by both institutional and personal leadership.

Third, through LAGs, LEADER has definitively contributed to the creation, maintenance and sustainability of stakeholder networks, although some recent research shows tendencies among county networks to remain – in contrast to LEADER region networks (historical, geographical, cultural and social reasons explain why those at the county level are stronger than those at a higher level). On the other hand, instead of geographically based networks, those LAGs that are elite-based have also increased, and their control of LAGs is not always fully accepted by those members of civil society not belonging to power elite groups.

Fourth, LAGs have increasingly contributed to the accurate identification of economic and social problems. During LEADER II and LEADER Plus, the diagnosis of situation-detecting needs and the strengths and weaknesses of the LEADER region led to increased involvement by civil society. The resulting development strategies (i.e., strategic plans) counted within their commitment, yet day-to-day implementation difficulties generated increasing disaffection by some sectors of civil society. In some cases, strategic plans were viewed more as formal requirements than as real instruments to be carefully and tightly followed. Changes by the European Commission, for example, forcing LAGs to select a dominant theme in LEADER Plus, were almost ineffective when some LAGs chose several or even all of the themes proposed by the EU, which in turn implied the willingness of LAGs to accept “every interesting initiative” coming from the local population –

indicating also the absence of strategic vision.

LEADER as a scenario of different types of power relations is also highlighted in the literature (Halfacree et al., 2002). Issues such as the democratic deficit, the co-existence and inconsistencies between bottom–up and top–down components, or the difficulties converting LEADER as a sustainable partnership, have arisen. The processes supporting LAGs as territorial governance instruments have been frequently criticized in Spain precisely for their lack of democratic legitimacy because politicians are elected. Nevertheless, LAGs have increasingly improved upon the mechanisms of representativeness within boards, thereby gaining in legitimacy. Despite the elimination of the formal dominance of politicians by EU regulations and the fact that some exceptions remained during the last programming period between 2007 and 2013, power elites (involving stakeholders other than politicians) are usually well represented and possess control over decision-making. This situation tends to be negatively valued by stakeholders at the margins of LEADER or those who are weakly involved in LAGs, and more inclusive efforts seen to be highly necessary. The narrow conception of LEADER as a mere bureaucratic economic development programme has contributed to this trend. Nevertheless, the larger potentialities of local, integrated development strategies in the new programming period 2014–2020 would be a significant opportunity by which to overcome such pitfalls.

LEADER is a bottom–up approach, yet it coexists with other top–down policies and programmes and, above all, with top–down mentalities and conceptions of development processes. In Spain, this coexistence still generates tensions and conflicts among stakeholders and organizations from both approaches, with negative consequences and inefficiencies in the implementation of LEADER as well as other development processes. Without questioning progress in rural Spain, stakeholders are seeking to meet the significant pedagogical challenges that Spanish LAGs still possess, showing that a bottom–up approach is efficient and effective not just in its own implementation but as an effective complement to top–down policies (e.g., those of a structural nature coming from CAP). On the other hand, from the perspective of local populations and civil society, it has been shown that a properly implemented LEADER is and could be an effective instrument for local governance, which in turn would encourage proactive attitudes and commitment to the future of the territory.

The conversion of LAGs and LEADER into viable and sustainable partnerships has been at the heart of LEADER rhetoric since the programme's inception at the end of the 1980s. LAGs have attempted to reach this viability and sustainability through a variety of means, some of which are more inclusive than others, and in some cases respond to the attempt by local elites to ensure their own hegemony (which has been obviously highly criticized by civil society and those local actors not belonging to power LEADER elites). Three main general discourses on power relations have been highlighted: the representation of different stakeholder groups, the territorial distribution of power and the assumption of power in the face of national and regional governments. In Spain, it has also been found that, as in other EU countries, an important deficit exists because LAGs still do not sufficiently include those social groups that tend to be excluded, sometimes because they are not interested (that is, LAG failed to garner interest and increased involvement). Nevertheless, experiences in certain LAGs have shown that with specific, clearly focused and participatory strategies addressing these social groups (mainly women and young unemployed people), significant positive results can be obtained. Thus, there is no excuse to undertake such a specific inclusive strategy, though LAGs need sufficient resources in order to cope.

In addition to elite-dominated coalitions, territorial power coalitions are also very present in Spanish LAGs. These territorial

coalitions have formed the basis for many negotiations and agreements (i.e., the over-highlighted ‘consensus’ mentioned by power elites) and served as one of the reasons for the diminishing tensions and conflicts during the last programming period (2007–2013). For those stakeholders not participating as power elites, territorial coalitions are as negative as those based on social and political positions, criticizing both formal and informal agreements on the distribution of funds. Such distributions may hide excellent, highly effective, well integrated or highly relevant proposals, even coming from other municipalities or overrepresented sectors that are probably much better in terms of economic and social benefits for the whole LEADER region.

Finally, stakeholders in Spanish LAGs are still afraid because LEADER, as a bottom–up approach, is not yet fully understood or accepted by civil servants and politicians within regional governments. This trend is confirmed, on one hand, by the limited percentage of funds devoted to Axis 4 (LEADER) in the Rural Development Programmes of the last programming period (i.e., in most regions, very close to the minimum required by the European Commission), which shows that regional authorities, despite their rhetorical discussion of the goodness of LEADER, maintained their real commitments at the minimum legal. On the other hand, in the current programmed period (2014–2020), regions have had the opportunity to take a step forward showing their commitment with a bottom–up approach; for example, not simply giving to local LEADER strategies more than the required percentage of funds but advancing to a more integrated strategic plan (i.e., so-called multi-fund strategies, promoting strategies beyond LEADER funded by other funds in addition to the European Agriculture Fund for Rural Development). New Rural Development Programmes are slated for approval in 2015, but available information confirms that again, local strategies will be limited by most regional authorities close to the traditional LEADER, despite enlarged potentialities provided by EU regulation (Regulation 1305/2013, on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development – EAFRD). Therefore, in Spain the slogan seems to be “if no new challenges nor any changes, then certain ensured stability”.

In conclusion, it could be said that, despite the many internal and external difficulties and constraints that Spanish LAGs face during their operation – since their establishment in 1991 – they are playing an increasingly significant lead role in the promotion, conduction and implementation of processes of economic, social and institutional changes in rural Spain. Future research should be aware of these aspects and seek to further explore the evolution of Spanish LEADER, paying attention to both the issues analysed herein and other relevant topics, as well as regional and even intraregional differences on these issues.

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