

Esparcia, J., Escribano, J., Buciega, A. (2015): "A perspective of LEADER Method in Spain Based on the Analysis of Local Action Groups", in Granberg, L., Andersson, K. and Kóvach, I. (Eds.): *Evaluating the European Approach to Rural Development. Gras-roots Experiences of the LEADER Programme*. Ashgate, Perspectives on Rural Policy and Planning, pp. 33-51.

Chapter 3

A Perspective of LEADER Method in Spain Based on the Analysis of Local Action Groups

Javier Esparcia, Jaime Escribano and Almudena Buciega

Introduction

LEADER has become an instrument for the socio-economic development of rural areas in Spain. The ultimate goals of the European Commission's Initiative, launched in 1991, however, were to go further. Through innovative approaches such as Local Action Groups (LAGs), it was intended that LEADER would also be a tool for the empowerment of local society and social cohesion. The LAG is therefore conceived as an element in participatory democracy that in many senses was ahead of its time especially if we bear in mind other territorial (urban) contexts at that time.

In the following, we conduct a review of the LAGs in Spain from a qualitative perspective, from 1991 to the present. We provide an overview of the growing importance of the LEADER approach throughout this time period of over 20 years. The chapter also examines how from the early stages one of the main instruments of LEADER (LAGs) has had to maintain a difficult balance between two opposing forces. On one hand are the opportunities arising from the guidelines, set by the European Commission, of participatory democracy (new governance) and empowerment of local society. On the other hand are the trends arising from the conception of LEADER and LAGs as instruments of power controlled by local elites, and in some cases (more so at certain stages and in certain regions) in connivance with regional governments. At different scales, these local or regional elites have used LEADER and LAGs as clientelistic tools.

This chapter has two main issues. The first concerns the LAGs either as instruments of participatory democracy and public – private cooperation (governance) or as instruments of power in the hands of elites. And the second concerns the constraints (positive and negative) arising from the social and institutional environment in which LAGs develop their work.

The chapter concludes with some thoughts on a range of strategic issues, following two decades of experience, which could be considered in order to improve the effectiveness of LAGs so that they can continue to play a central role in the social and economic development of rural areas.

Theoretical Perspectives on LEADER between Governance and Power

It is known that LEADER marked two major innovations (Ray 2000; Shucksmith and Shortall 2001; Dargan and Shucksmith 2008; Shortall 2008). First, it is a territorial approach 'by and for' the local population, being a factor in the empowerment of local society and a means 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 LAGs. LEADER performs a double function. First, it encourages (new) governance for rural areas (Goodwin 1998; Marsden and Murdoch 1998), providing a learning and capacity-building process for the local society and its most representative or dynamic actors. Second, it stimulates the democratisation of decision-making processes in local socio-economic development, which were previously controlled almost exclusively by public actors. In this context LEADER contributes to the legitimacy of collaborative stakeholder decisions (Connelly et al. 2006). However, this conception of LEADER has not always been predominant from the perspective of all rural actors. LEADER has also been the stage of tensions and power struggles between various elites, who have turned the programme in general, and LAGs in particular, into instruments of power.

In this section, we will use the literature to form a more in-depth analysis of these two main views of LEADER and LAGs (as the scenario for new rural governance and democratisation processes, and as an instrument of power and the stage of local elite power relations), in order to provide the context in which to analyse and raise the key issues for the Spanish case study.

LEADER as a Form of Rural Governance and Democratisation Processes

It is certain that LEADER has made significant advances in fostering governance networks, which may be an instrument for local democratisation (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003; Thuesen 2010). Governance, democratisation and emergence of networks are three key issues with which to better understand LEADER.

Most scholars concur that LEADER is an interesting attempt to implement a new form of governance in rural areas (Moyano 2001; Garrido and Moyano 2002). Some general key issues of new governance (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003; Rhodes 1996 and 1997; Stoker 1998; Sorensen 2006) are fully valid for the territorial approach to rural development. In the analysis of rural areas we may take into consideration Stoker's main propositions on governance (Stoker 1998). He points out first that governance involves a complex set of institutions and actors that go beyond the municipal government; second, that it assumes the presence of networks of actors (public, private and social) that enjoy autonomy in decision-making; third, that it focuses on the identification of economic and social problems, beyond the boundaries that exist between administrations and organisations operating at a local scale; fourth, that it allows the identification of dependencies and power relations between the institutions, organisations and

actors involved in the various actions (taking the proper decisions); and finally, that governance recognises that the ability to make decisions and implement actions does not reside solely in the legal authority of the public administrations, but also in the authority that derives from the leadership of the institutions and actors involved in the development processes. In this sense LEADER rhetoric meets Stoker's propositions on governance.

But LEADER may be analysed also from its programmatic design (Böcher 2008). At least four main principles are present in LEADER that may be highlighted, which are central issues for efficient governance, and their implementation is a necessary – but not sufficient – condition for successful programmes.

These aspects are the contribution to self-governance (based mainly – but not exclusively – on the expected implementation of endogenous development processes through LEADER strategic plans); the relatively high decision-making capacity of the local actors; the inter-sectorial cooperation through networks and partnerships, and finally – complementary to the last aspect – 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).

In this context, LAGs may play the strategic role of Marsden's 'reflexive governance platforms' (Marsden 2013) but also may provide a forum for partnership, networking and consensus building (Lee et al. 2005). Their effectiveness could be crucial for the success of the programmes, since competent networks of stakeholders (such as LAGs) are more able to identify innovative solutions to the various problems and needs faced by rural areas (Thuesen 2010). Moreover, the importance of networks and networking processes for rural development has also been pointed out in the literature (Lowe et al. 1995; Murdoch 2000; Esparcia 2014), also as a key factor for the increase of social capital (Almudena and Esparcia 2013).

As elements for a democratic process LAGs are in theory open to citizens, allowing them to participate in giving opinions, contributing to the diagnosis of problems and requirements, and in the design of development strategies (Ray 2000). The more open LAGs are and the higher the degree of citizen involvement is, the more democratic they are. The legitimacy of this new rural governance is not automatic, since the representativeness of social and private stakeholders may be open to discussion everywhere. As has been pointed out, however, legitimacy is continuously constructed through discursive processes and a complex mix of competing rationales (Connelly et al. 2006).

LEADER as Scenario for Power Relations

In spite of the highly positive aspects of LEADER related to rural governance, democracy, partnership and networks (including social capital), some observations must be considered from the perspective of the practical implementation of LEADER. It has also an initial democratic deficit, because a number of the

LAG members are not elected through a democratic procedure. In the same way, 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).

Probably the most fruitful interpretation of the 'negative externalities' of LEADER comes from the consideration of power as a matter of social production, in the context of new rural governance. In this sense LEADER could be interpreted as the scene in which actors and institutions attempt to gain 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, which may explain the distribution of stakeholders in LEADER and its decision-making bodies (Goodwin 1998). Frequently, however, new governance mechanisms have the purpose 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 decision-making bodies) only the key actors belonging to or coming from specific elite groups (public, economic or civic, or a combination of these).

With regard to power relations in LEADER, we found three main types of discourses, firstly related to the representation of different stakeholder groups (young people, women, politicians, etc.); secondly connected to the assumption of LAG responsibilities (and power) in the face of national or regional governments; and thirdly concerning to the territorial distribution of power within the LEADER areas.

In relation to the discourse of representation, it is certainly common that some groups (such as women, farmers, and young people) are less interested, or entirely uninterested in being involved in local structures for territorial governance (Shortall 2008), or are not well enough organised for this (Thuesen 2010), despite the fact that EU guidelines prescribe and support the broad participation of these groups (Böcher 2008). In fact, it has also been 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 argue that there is a tendency to favour those who are already more powerful and better articulated, and who may construct obstacles to the inclusion (or real involvement) of new actors in the decision-making structures of LAGs (Thuesen 2010; Esparcia 2011). In those situations, inclusion, empowerment and wider involvement of stakeholders and those groups with marginal positions is needed, as it contributes to the avoidance of elitism by the political class (Storey 1999; Scott 2004; Marsden 2013).

The second type of discourse concerns distribution of power from regional or national governments and LEADER. As Böcher has pointed out, 'the ideal of the autonomous self-government of rural areas through rural partnerships and networks, which is the central idea of regional governance ... rarely takes place in practice in its ideal form' (2008, 383). In practical terms, the main conflicts

are caused by the reluctance of some officers in regional or national governments to let local actors to take on responsibilities in public fund management limiting autonomous steering at LAG level.

The third discourse concerns the territorial distribution of power, which explains much of the tension and conflict at the scale of LEADER. Within the LEADER regions it is common that a small number of economically more dynamic municipalities tend to concentrate more resources and power compared to other municipalities. Therefore, territorial tensions are not rare within the LEADER regions. Moreover, since the actors from economic or civic sectors are often less involved in LEADER, territorial tensions within the regions tend to be primarily of political nature (Esparcia 2011).

An Overview of LEADER in Spain

The Rise and 'Success' Of LEADER Approach

During the 1990s, LEADER already meant a real change of mentality in Spanish disadvantaged rural areas. Although at the beginning it could be seen by some sectors as a simple programme to channel aid to the poorest rural areas, it was gradually understood that it could be a genuine tool for development (Esparcia 2000; Esparcia et al. 2000a). Rural stakeholders were aware that the development of rural areas implies the productive diversification and the promotion of complementarity of income, and LEADER was a – partial – instrument for this purpose. LEADER was also an instrument for local management of these processes of development, based on cooperation between social, economic and institutional actors. Awareness of this issue, however, took more time to arise, and even today, in some cases, local actors do not realise the full potential of LAGs. But in general LEADER has been in Spain a novel means of approaching the problems of the rural world, not least because the local actors, for the first time, have been protagonists in important decisions affecting the development of their territories. Table 3.1 shows the main features of the various programmes and issues of LEADER and PRODER (note 3 in the table), the twin programmes implemented between 1996 and 2006. From these figures, highlighting an obvious growth in the area and population covered, and the public invested funding, many officials and politicians talk about the 'success' of LEADER in Spain.

Table 3.1 Basic Data and Some Observations of the LEADER Approach in Spain (1991–2013)

	LEADER I¹ (1991–94)	LEADER II² (1994–99)	PRODER I³ (1996–99)	LEADER Plus^{4,5} (2000–6)	PRODER 2 (2000–06)^{4,5,6}	LEADER-Axis 4⁷ (2007–13)
LAGs⁸	53	133	101	145	162	264
Km² (*1,000) (and percentage of country's total area)	82 (16.2%)	226 (45.0%)	120 (4.8%)	251 (49.8%)	234 (46.4%)	448 (88.8%)
Inhabitants (Million) (and percentage of country's total population)	1.85 (4.8%)	4.7 (11.2%)	4.4 (10.0%)	5.9 (13.4%)	7.6 (17.0%)	12.4 (26.8%)
Inhabitants / Km²	22.6	20.8	36.7	23.5	32.4	27.7
Budget (Million €)	387	1,364	791	1,794	828 ⁹	1,474

Notes:

¹ Predominance of the private sector (10 per cent of LAGs): higher dynamism.

² General context: consolidation of LEADER as instrument for development. Nevertheless, some LAGs became instruments of power and political control at local level.

³ PRODER (Operational Programme of Development and Economic Diversification of Rural Areas). Twin programme of LEADER restricted to Objective 1 regions but implemented in areas with fewer socio-economic limitations. Was successful enhancing productive initiatives in the secondary and tertiary sectors, as well as promotion of rural heritage (Esparcia 2001 and 2003b; Esparcia and Noguera 2004; Esparcia 2006).

⁴ Despite the limitation of public sector in decision boards of LAGs, some regional governments and LAGs ignored the bottom-up methodology and continued using LEADER and PRODER as clientelistic and power instruments.

⁵ Private investments were very important. The projects were less innovative in comparison with the previous stage.

⁶ Some regions allow implementation of LEADER and PRODER in the same territories, by the same LAG, enhancing their complementarities (Esparcia 2009). Galicia funded an additional rural development programme (AGADER) focused on the most deprived areas (10 LAGs, 4,948 km², 0.23 million inhabitants).

⁷ Integration of LEADER as specific axis of rural development, working together mainly with axes 1 and 2. Moreover it was expected to become an instrument to improve the governance in rural areas. Both aspects have failed in Spain.

⁸ Number of LAGs and other collective actors.

⁹ Initial public budget only; no data for private budget, but it exceeds public figures.

Source: Own elaboration from several years, Ministry of Agriculture (Spain).

The implication of these programmes, however, requires some additional remarks, mainly related to the last period, 2007–2013. It stands out because the territorial development programmes were integrated as a specific axis of rural development. The significance of the Axis 4 – LEADER – laid not so much in the actions but in the ability to manage measures and actions in other axes of this rural development policy, becoming, in theory, an instrument for the improvement of governance in rural areas. Nevertheless, the reality was very different. There was no confluence and understanding between agricultural and rural development lobbies, the former being afraid of potential interference and convinced of a drawdown of funds by the LAGs. The period 2007–2013 can be regarded as a failure in the attempt to extend and improve governance in rural areas through the LEADER method in Spain.

Other related problems were still present and overcoming them provides a significant challenge for the period of 2014–2020. These problems contribute to explain some of the results we will see in the next sections related to the role of LAGs. First, in many rural areas people primarily perceive the symptoms of failure and exhaustion of the model (and actors), accentuated by the increasingly strong bureaucratisation of the process (Sáenz 2011). Second, skirting the rules, some regions have virtually eliminated the actual functionality of the LAG (despite the preponderance of private actors, with an average of 57 per cent in the country), leaving the decision-making bodies as mere ‘stone guests’, with the real decisions taken by the regional political and administrative structures. Third, the dismantlement of experienced managerial teams has also contributed to make the programmes into a mere instrument of power in the hands of these regional governments and, in some cases, local elites (as in the regions of Valencia and La Rioja, in which in addition, non-public stakeholders in the period 2007–2013 accounted for slightly more than one-third of the stakeholders on average). Fourth, there are certain examples of LAGs that were clearly created from particular policy options (or clientelistic networks), and/or very close monitoring from regional governments (Sáenz 2011, 82). Although this is not a widespread situation, it necessitates a major renovation.

From Governance to Power Relations and the Role of Lags

As we have seen, LEADER has had a major impact in Spain, in terms of geographical coverage and because of the funds that have been mobilised (Moyano 2005). A comprehensive recent study lists these achievements (Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Medio Rural y Marino 2011). Important progress has been made in the two major dimensions LEADER. The first dimension referred to is the diversification of economic activities (with the launch of a number of initiatives supporting the fragile rural economy). The second dimension is that of LEADER as an element for the improvement of governance, social capital and social networks, and the empowerment of local society. None of this has been achieved, however, without tensions and power conflicts.

Our analysis of LEADER in Spain shows that power conflicts and tensions are frequent, and they are often latent in local society (Esparcia 2000; Esparcia et al. 2000a and 2000b; Esparcia 2011; Esparcia and Escibano 2011 and 2012). Such conflicts arise with a high intensity in connection of LEADER, perhaps because of the control of resources. LEADER is conceived as an instrument of power and, as a consequence, is the subject of power struggles between the different elites. Power is present in a set of situations in which actors may play different roles, and power relations may go from a tacit consensus (to maintain compromises and equilibrium while available resources are shared according to some – not necessarily written – rules), to outright confrontation. The former situations are widely represented, but 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, mainly, the distribution of resources.

At times there are different groups of elites. For example, local politicians fear loss of decision-making power (democratically legitimated by public institutions; that is, government structures) in favour of LAGs (not democratically legitimated, despite being included in government structures). In this sense it is not uncommon that public representatives constitute and act as power elites even against civic and economic stakeholders. On other occasions, territorial coalitions (from the same municipalities) between public, social and/or economic actors are the main driving force. Power conflicts could arise because some regional governments are sceptical on the capacity of local actors and LAGs to properly conduct the necessary processes and manage resources, and because from the perspective of regional government officials, LAGs are not sufficiently legitimated from a democratic point of view, including as they do unelected members, and managing public funds, which is not seen as their proper function. From such a discourse, which has been widely encountered, we may understand why some regional governments have not encouraged the development of rural governance and the empowerment of local stakeholders.

In the following sections we explore some of these key factors for a better understanding of the role of Spanish LAGs, which have been caught between the rhetoric of LEADER as an instrument for rural governance, social networking, capacity building, and local empowerment (in the context of democratisation processes); and the tensions and conflicts arising from its practical implementation and daily management, in which power relations could highly limit those achievements.

In the context of Spain, possibly the most important innovation of the LEADER approach to rural development has been the presence of LAGs. In the classical scheme of the LEADER method, LAGs form an element that not only channels funding and encourages cooperation or networking, but also constitutes the practical implementation of two of the three key factors of development: the creation of an institutional context for local development and the leadership of

local stakeholders (the third being the territory) (Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Medio Rural y Marino 2011).

Aims and Tools of Analysis of Spanish Lags

The aim of the following section is to conduct a basic assessment of local action groups of LEADER in Spain, according to three key elements. They are the LAG as an instrument for governance, the social institutional environment of the LAG, and the thematic working groups as one of the main innovations fostering participation and involvement of stakeholders. The methodology focuses on two aspects:

1. Consultation of available documents about the LAGs in Spain, although the information is highly fragmented and incomplete both in terms of territorial coverage and the temporal perspective. In particular, we focus on official evaluations and other 'grey' information published by the LAGs themselves as well as scientific papers on the issue (Esparcia and Noguera 2003 and 2004; ENRD 2010a, 2010b and 2011).
2. Analysis and qualitative assessment from two focus group sessions organised for this objective and conducted in late 2011 (Esparcia 2011). The two focus group sessions were conducted with team leaders (in the management teams) and presidents of some LAGs, respectively.

The material for the following sections thus mainly comes from the analysis of the documents about LAGs in Spain and from the ideas collected during the focus group sessions. Additionally, we make use of subsequent personal interviews with some of the participants discussing the results obtained.

Particular attention will be paid to two main issues. The first one is related to whether LAGs have been effective instruments for governance (as may be expected from the rhetoric of LEADER), or have they been more dominated by power relations with clientelistic patterns. The second issue is related to the social and institutional environments in which LAGs should work, and to what extent these environments could condition LAGs' achievements, facilitating or hindering effective governance by local actors in decision-making bodies.

Local Action Groups: Between the Rhetoric and Practical Implementation

Local Action Groups as an Instrument for Governance

In the late 1980s in Spain, there were no instruments of inter-municipal cooperation beyond the associations of municipalities (*mancomunidades*), which were restricted to the management or delivery of certain common services, for instance urban solid waste collection and social services. In this context, the implementation

of LEADER was an innovation since LAG constituted in most rural areas the first inter-municipal body allowing territorial cooperation (Esparcia 2000). It was practically the first time that neighbouring municipalities had a forum for discussion and debate about common problems and aspirations. Under LEADER these forums could create development strategies; the impetus behind these was more or less shared, but mainly arose from the forums. Therefore, LEADER and LAGs became catalysts and expressions of a feeling of cooperation. In this sense it is true that while the Agricultural Mountain Act of 1982 began to build some relationships between rural municipalities, such relations were not comparable to even the first LAGs. In this regard, the ability of LAGs has been developed in recent years as a forum for discussion of problems and the needs of rural areas, often beyond what were the limitations of LEADER.

The first LAGs, however, are not comparable to the current situation. Indeed, in those early days the presence of public institutions predominated, due to the difficulties in mobilising the often scarce private actors, or simply via the control that some councils imposed or attempted to impose over these new bodies. Far from being understood as an instrument of development from the local perspective, in some cases the LAG were primarily conceived for public actors and, obviously more implicit than explicit, as instruments of power and consolidation or development of new clientelistic structures at the local scale (Esparcia 2000 and 2001). This situation, which was present (though not a widespread situation) in the early stages, was fortunately diluted by LEADER II and it can now be said that most local actors – both public and private – understand, conceive and work with the perspective of LAGs as instruments of territorial development.

Although it has occurred slowly and with some difficulties and exceptions, at present we can conclude that private actors have reached a more relevant position than they had in the early stages, having overcome the ‘inferiority complex’ with respect to public actors. This has been due, first, to the rules introduced by the European Commission in limiting the participation of public actors in the LAGs’ decision-making structures, but also to the maturation of the private actors themselves with regard to their social role in the development of rural areas and within the LAGs. But despite these advances, and the fact that the EU rules nominally set the participation of public actors at no more than 50 per cent in the decision-making bodies, it is recognised that for practical purposes the influence of public actors in the final decisions is still above that of their nominal presence. In fact, it is not exceptional that public actors appeal to their contribution to the funding in order to maintain their dominant position in the crucial decision-making.

In spite of mentioned difficulties, LEADER has provided a clear relationship between public and private actors in rural areas, the latter having complemented the view held by public actors on the area and its needs. However it should be noted that a stronger presence of different groups of actors – both public and private – in the LAG does not necessarily imply that they have a shared territorial development project. In fact, the usual situation is to find cases in which they

have cooperated only for specific purposes and to develop agreements on priorities which are frequently of the short- and medium-term. What is still lacking are medium- to long-term strategies, articulated and shared by all members of the LAG. In short, there are still no wide development strategies and no culture of commitment on joint and shared territorial development projects.

With some frequency, lobbies (territorial or sectorial) and even some powerful municipalities transfer their confrontations and interests to the LAG decision-making body, not always responding to the general interest. At times confrontations have emerged between public and non-public actors because of the different perspective, different priorities and ways to address the area's needs, or because of how interventions should be implemented. In this context, dominant elites tend to develop more strategic and well-practised methods to manage power and power relations based on clientelism.

In this sense it is often painted as a significant indicator of progress that LAGs have developed a culture of seeking agreements and consensus. Local actors boast that decisions are taken without voting, but otherwise they make no reference to the non-formal framework of negotiations, covenants and agreements established outside of the meeting decisions, based on the correlation of forces and the capacity to influence each of the different actors, as in a classical actors' game based on individual power relations.

Certainly this culture of covenant-consensus has made it possible to avoid earlier quite common situations, in which decision-making was a complex process, riddled with tensions and confrontations. Before the formal decision-making process, non-formal agreements were frequent, but usually they were controlled by and oriented to the interests of powerful actors, especially those of a public nature. This was criticised as 'politicisation'. To cope with and limit arbitrariness, private and also some public actors tried to establish clear technical criteria for decision-making (assuming that this meant a supposed objectivity and neutrality in the process). But criteria, even those of a more technical nature, are not neutral (Forester 1989).

Through an important process of maturation, LAGs increasingly became an instrument of participation and capacity building in rural areas (in the sense pointed out by Shucksmith 2000). Social acceptance of LAG members increased. Economic actors were more present and better represented. But a set of negative aspects still characterises LAGs in Spain (some of them not directly under their own responsibility). First, in parallel with social acceptance, expectations increased even about issues in which LAGs have no capacity to do anything. This inability to respond to social expectations led to frustration and dissatisfaction among certain sectors of the population, who do not have a clear idea on the limitations and real role of LAGs. Second, changes in the municipalities and public representatives within the LAGs, after political elections, are considered (mainly by managerial teams and private and social actors) as an element of instability and loss of efficiency in decision-making bodies as well as a slowdown in the operation of the programme. Third, some social groups such as young

people and women are still usually underrepresented, at least in the decision-making bodies. Taking into account that the presence of these minorities affects articulation as a group and contributes to better networking in the local society (Bartol and Zhang 2007), it would be strategic to pay special attention to this issue. Fourth, loss of LAG autonomy with respect to regional government has increased recently, with negative effects on the implementation of the LEADER approach. The LAGs no longer have the initial autonomy and capacity for direct control of funds. Administrative controls became larger and more stringent despite the repeatedly announced simplification by the European Commission. During the period 2007–2013, some LAGs had an almost accessory or secondary role with respect to the regional government, being a perversion of the basic philosophy and LEADER approach. Fortunately these cases are an exception in Spain as a whole, so in no way do they tarnish the good work that has led to the development of regional governments and LAGs in most of the country.

The Social and Institutional Environment of the Lags

The LAGs are conceived as comprising an instrument with which to facilitate the participation of public and private actors, but this work takes place in an institutional environment that has a fundamental role to the extent that the actual operation of the LAGs can be affected. In general, the LAGs in Spain have been consolidated as an instrument of cooperation between different institutions of the LEADER region, mainly public, but also private. However, as the LAGs have been consolidated and strengthened, they have also become partners for other institutions, bringing increasingly more legitimacy in the institutional environment. There are three explanatory elements for this growing legitimisation (Esparcia 2011). First, the establishment of a forum for the participation of stakeholders in the territory, actors who have a clear legitimacy (city councils) and others with a growing recognition (economic and social actors, especially when they are articulated by associations or organisations). Second, the stringency of the work which the LAGs have progressed in the management of the programmes of territorial development, under which have been launched concrete and tangible actions that have benefited the socio-economic structure of the territory, and are thus appreciated mostly by local society. And third, this growing legitimacy derives from the fact that some LAGs have been able to assume and address functions and activities beyond the management of the LEADER programme.

This has meant recognition in the institutional environment which has contributed to the legitimization of the LAGs. Ultimately, the role of and the good relationships with public and private institutions have resulted in a greater flexibility in the management of actions and a greater proximity to citizens in general, and the beneficiaries in particular. The legitimisation of the LAGs in the rural territories is something already consolidated in most cases. They have been accumulating and now maintain an important credit of legitimacy in their immediate – local – institutional environment. This is different, however, to

the situation in the regional institutional environment, in which the LAGs have reached much lower levels of legitimacy (with the occasional exception of the department of the regional government dealing with rural development).

In any case, there are exceptions to these general trends, and there are weaknesses that threaten the prestige and legitimacy that has been gained since the LAGs started to operate in the 1990s. Some of the elements that are at the basis of these difficulties in the legitimisation of the LAGs include changes in the composition of the groups; increase in size; localisms; ignorance, distrust and excessive intervention from regional bodies; loss of efficiency in the revitalisation work that has occurred in these years; and, among others, the inadequacy of instruments and means available to deal with functions that go beyond LEADER.

Indeed, territorial reconfiguration and increase in size has often forced the re-composition of the relationships between stakeholders (primarily public) and also to some extent the method of work, while developing intense efforts of pedagogy with the new members of the LAGs. All of this has slowed or even deteriorated the involvement and embeddedness of the LAGs in their social and institutional environment. It has also contributed to the maintenance and exacerbation of localisms, often linked to a lack of leadership, maturity and even appropriate knowledge on the part of public officials of what is meant by the LAGs and LEADER as instruments of cooperation and development for the territory. These difficulties have been reproduced with the political changes resulting from local elections, but also in the initial moments in each of the different periods. In this context some confrontations and struggles for power have emerged, thus contributing to the loss of prestige and social and institutional legitimacy of the LAGs.

The legitimacy of LAGs faces other weaknesses. On one hand, LAGs tend to have a high degree of uncertainty. This is because many of them are engaged with other additional initiatives, without a clear delimitation of such tasks (especially in the decision-making bodies) and, above all, without necessary instruments and work teams to address additional initiatives. The LAGs are engaged with and launch initiatives depending on the resources available at a given time, but they lack a clear strategy or medium- and long-term initiatives. In this sense, it is essential that the clarification of functions occurs within the management bodies as well as in the immediate institutional environment, i.e. clarification of the role of the LAGs in territorial development and the complementarities and cooperation mechanisms which can be mobilised with different institutions and public and private actors in the territory. Certainly there are significant even if still insufficient advances in this relation. In a large part, the social and institutional legitimacy of LAGs will be conditioned by the strength, transparency, effectiveness and commitment of the stakeholders that shape them.

On the other hand, aforementioned bureaucratisation and growing weight of daily management limit efforts in more strategic areas. This is more important when the legitimacy of the LAGs is seriously limited due to the political confrontations, the localisms and the possible lack of harmony between (primarily

public) institutions. If the LAGs lose effectiveness in the work of revitalisation and as forums for discussion and strategic planning, they lose their legitimacy, not only in this institutional context, but also in relation to the local society.

An additional obstacle in the legitimisation of the LAGs is the excessive interventionism of some regional governments. Indeed, from the first moments in LEADER I and LEADER II, some regional governments have had a certain lack of trust in relation to the novel approach of decentralised management. This distrust resulted in the strict monitoring of the tasks developed by LAGs, ensuring that they worked within the limits of the functions related to the management and execution of a budget in a series of actions and specific projects (Esparcia and Noguera 2003). Obviously it was also a way to keep power in the hands of regional government officers and politicians in charge. But as the programme has progressed, it has in some cases slowed or stopped the process of legitimisation of LAGs (especially during the periods of LEADER Plus, 2000–2006, and even more during LEADER-Axis 4, 2007–2013). The reasons are diverse and range from ignorance of the implications of the LEADER approach to consideration of it as an instrument of clientelism, resulting both in the imposition of certain boundaries and in conditioning of the composition and operation of LAGs.

In addition to the already excessive bureaucratisation of LEADER, some Spanish regional governments imposed a basically administrative conception of the programme, with the justification (or excuse) of higher efficiency, which in any case is not proven. The result has been that many LAGs have suffered the loss of social and economic revitalisation functions to the detriment of the basically daily administrative follow-up conception. In this context, it is easy to understand the immense damage that these processes are doing to the LEADER approach. That will probably be highlighted in some of the upcoming evaluations of rural development programmes (2007–2013).

Conclusions and Strategic Issues for the Near Future

According to Spanish experiences, LAGs are among the most important political innovations, being a basic and central ingredient in the territorial approach to rural development. Local and decentralised management and cooperation between public and private actors are the essence of the LEADER method, which is one of the best examples of new governance in the context of European Union. However, as seen in the previous sections, the Spanish LAGs are still moving between their theoretical role as an instrument of development and being means of power relations including clientelistic practices. This dilemma exists both locally and on the level of regional governments, limiting greatly the progress towards mentioned theoretical objectives.

In the early stages of the implementation of the LEADER method and LAGs, many difficulties were faced, because of lack of experience, the slow pace of operations, consequent delays in effective implementation, and the high level of

intervention in and control of the process by local public officials. There were no malicious intentions in these interventions from the side of regional governments, but they lacked previous experience, and private actors were poorly organised, even to the point of being barely visible. Gradually the procedures were improved with an increasing participation of private and social sectors and with clearer roles, functions and initiatives to be fostered.

— A series of functions has been assigned to LAGs: first, the direct management of public funds through the promotion of specific actions (in certain sectors or specific areas); second, to be an instrument to facilitate the participation of stakeholders in development efforts and to revitalise local societies; and third, to design (with the support of managerial and professional teams) ‘comprehensive development strategies’, which means local strategic plans. These plans work as the reference in which actions are framed (Esparcia 2003a and 2006).

— LAGs have certainly made a great effort in social animation and economic activities, and have reached many remarkable results. However, these results have been achieved with minor resources and often in difficult circumstances: without sufficient training or necessary knowledge and skills to design and to implement properly the LEADER strategic plans. Achievements have often been reached first and foremost up to the intensive personal involvement and the high commitment by the LAGs’ members.

— Even if a large part of the progress depends on commitments of local actors, it is also necessary to reach deep commitment of the regional government. According to past experiences, the lack of such a commitment used to lead to failures in adopting any serious and comprehensive policy for territorial development in Rural Spain. Unfortunately, it seems still today that the level of conviction is low among the regional governments, that LAGs could work as a potential instrument of territorial development beyond what LEADER as such offers (Escribano and Esparcia 2012).

Based on past experience, Spanish LAG approach should be developed around three main axes: rural territory as the scope of development (surpassing localism); strategic view as the steering principle, expressed in local development strategy; and seeing LAG as one key instrument among others.

— More practically, LAGs should take into account a set of key issues, only to mention some of them here. For example, clearer stakeholder involvement and participation of private actors in the decision-making structures should be supported, paying particular attention to young people and women. Also, greater commitment of LAG members should be encouraged. Where appropriate, the completion of this work will enhance the networking within LAGs and between the different groups: young people, entrepreneurs, artisans, retailers, etc., and last but not least among women. One can list several other needs for reforming LAGs: training of managerial teams and of LAG members (especially on strategic issues); using self-assessment as a learning mechanism, especially for managers and LAG members; developing strategic thinking for the territory; and designing and implementing development strategies of medium- and long-term perspectives.

However, efficient work by the LAGs to reach such goals is difficult to be achieved without a genuine simplification of administrative procedures. LAGs should be allowed a greater role in facing the administrative management of the programmes, as well as in the implementation of the development strategies.

One of the basic achievements of LAGs is networking. In doing so, they contribute to the creation and development of bonding and linking social capital in rural areas. Networking is not just important within LAGs or between LAGs and other institutions in the rural area but between different territories or institutions outside the rural area. Here LAGs could take an important role in establishing and developing linkages between them and their respective actors; for example business centres, chambers of commerce, and various departments in regional government (Buciega and Esparcia 2013).

In relation to the external sphere of LAGs, the role of regional governments is highly important in Spain. Regional governments should provide more flexibility for LAG operations, avoiding interferences in decision-making, respecting the bottom-up methodology, and promoting positive elements in the culture of territorial governance. They should find solutions for lacking resources, needed to achieve the planned objectives as well as facilitate coordination between LEADER approach and other policies or programmes of special incidence in rural areas.

Our research results among the members in Spanish LAGs resume their request to return to the model used in LEADER I and LEADER II, in terms of design and operation of the programmes, and also their respect to the roles and functions of the LAGs in local society. In that time they were not, however, aware of the new context and the important changes that the reform of CAP and its second pillar will mean in the coming years for territorial and rural development. These changes constitute a framework that new – and probably very different – LAGs should deeply consider.

References

- Bartol, K.M., Zhang, X., 2007. Networks and leadership development: Building linkages for capacity acquisition and capital accrual. *Human Resource Management Review*, 17(4), pp. 388–401.
- Böcher, M., 2008. Regional governance and rural development in Germany: the implementation of LEADER+. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 48(4), pp. 373–88.
- Buciega, A., Esparcia, J., 2013. Desarrollo, territorio y capital social. Un análisis a partir de las dinámicas relacionales en el desarrollo rural. *REDES. Revista hispana para el análisis de redes sociales*, 24(1), 81–112.
- Connelly, S., Richardson, T., Miles, T., 2006. Situated legitimacy: Deliberative arenas and the new rural governance. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 22, pp. 267–77.
- Dargan, L., Shucksmith, M., 2008. LEADER and Innovation. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 48(3), pp. 274–91.

- ENRD, 2010a. *Summary of the Extended Report on the Implementation of LEADER Approach*. European Network for Rural Development, Brussels, p. 24.
- , 2010b. *The Implementation of the bottom-up approach. Extended Report*. European Network for Rural Development, Brussels, p. 44.
- , 2011. *Supplementary Report on specific aspects of LEADER approach implementation*. European Network for Rural Development, Brussels, p. 37.
- Escribano, J., Esparcia, J., 2012. Social Context, social capital and rural development in the region of Valencia (Spain). *XIII World Congress of Rural Sociology*, 29 July – 4 August, Lisbon.
- Esparcia, J., 2000. The LEADER programme and the rise of rural development in Spain. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 40(2), pp. 200–207.
- , 2001. PRODER 2: Características y principales innovaciones. *Actualidad LEADER. Revista de Desarrollo Rural*, 16, pp. 10–13.
- , 2003a. Valoración y balance de LEADER II. La consolidación de un modelo. *Actualidad LEADER. Revista de Desarrollo Rural*, 21, pp. 8–15.
- , 2003b. Valoración y balance de PRODER. Versión original. *Actualidad LEADER. Revista de Desarrollo Rural*, 22, 16–19.
- , 2006. LEADER II y PRODER en el Desarrollo rural en España. *Estrategias territoriales de Desarrollo Rural*. Institución Fernando El Católico, Diputación de Zaragoza, Zaragoza, pp. 65–89.
- , 2009. La nueva estructura de la Política Europea de Desarrollo Rural 2007–2009. Innovaciones y Retos. In: Gómez Espín, J.M., Martínez Medina, R., eds. *Desarrollo Rural en el Siglo XXI: Nuevas orientaciones y territorios*. XIX. Coloquio de Geografía Rural, Murcia 2009, Universidad de Murcia, Servicio de Publicaciones, pp. 167–202.
- , 2011. Los Grupos de Acción Local. In: Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Medio Rural y Marino. *LEADER en España (1991–2011). Una contribución activa al desarrollo rural*, Madrid: Red Rural Nacional, pp. 97–124.
- , 2014. Innovation and networks in rural areas. An analysis from European innovative projects. *Journal of Rural Studies* 34, pp. 1–14.
- Esparcia, J., Escribano, J., 2011. Desarrollo territorial y reforma de la PAC. In: Moyano, E., ed., 2011. *El Futuro de la PAC es nuestro Futuro*. Anuario: Fundación de Estudios Rurales, pp. 142–9.
- , 2012. Social Networks and Social Capital in Rural Development in Spain. *XIII World Congress of Rural Sociology*, 29 July–4 August, Lisbon.
- Esparcia, J., Moseley, M., Noguera, J., 2000b. *Exploring rural development partnerships in Europe. An analysis of 330 local partnerships across eight EU countries*. Valencia: University of Valencia.
- Esparcia, J., Noguera, J., 2003. *Ex-post evaluation of the Community Initiative LEADER II. Spain*. European Comisión – DG AGRI, 12/2002 – 09/2003.
- , 2004. *Study for the methods for and success of mainstreaming LEADER innovations and approach into rural development programmes. Spain (PRODER Programme)*. European Comisión – DG AGRI, 09/2003 – 03/2004.

- Esparcia, J., Noguera, J., Pitarch, M.D., 2000a. LEADER en España: desarrollo rural, poder, legitimación, aprendizaje y nuevas estructuras. *Documents d'Anàlisi Geogràfica*, 37, pp. 95–113.
- Forester, J., 1989. *Planning in the Face of Power*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Garrido, F., Moyano, E., 2002. Capital social y desarrollo en zonas rurales. *Revista Internacional de Sociología*, 33, sep-dic, pp. 67–96.
- Goodwin, M., 1998. The Governance of Rural Areas: Some Emerging Research Issues and Agendas. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 14(1), pp. 5–12.
- Hajer, M., Wagenaar, H., eds, 2003. *Deliberative policy analysis: understanding governance in network societies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kováč, I., 2000. LEADER, a new social order, and the central –and East-European countries'. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 40(2), pp. 181–9.
- Kováč, I., Kucerova, E., 2006. The Project class in central Europe: the Czech and Hungarian cases. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 46(1), pp. 3–21.
- Lee, J., Árnason, A., Nightingale, A., Shucksmith, M., 2005. Networking: Social Capital and Identities in European Rural Development. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 45(4), pp. 269–83.
- Lowe, P., Murdoch, J., Ward, N., 1995. Networks in Rural Development: Beyond Exogenous and Endogenous Models. In: van Der Ploeg, J.D., ed. *Beyond modernization: the impact of endogenous rural development*, Assen: Van Gorcum, pp. 87–105.
- Marsden, T., 2013. From post-productionism to reflexive governance: Contested transitions in securing more sustainable food futures. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 29, pp. 123–34.
- Marsden, T., Murdoch, J., 1998. The shifting nature of rural governance and community participation. Editorial. *Journal of Rural Studies*, Special Issue, 14(1), pp. 1–4.
- Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Medio Rural y Marino, 2011. *LEADER en España (1991–2011). Una contribución activa al desarrollo rural*, Madrid: Red Rural Nacional, p. 348.
- Moyano, E., 2001. El concepto de capital social y su utilidad para el análisis de las dinámicas del desarrollo. *Revista de Fomento Social*, 56(221), 35–63.
- , 2005. Social and economic changes and players in rural areas of the south of Europe. First version in: B. Kasimis and T. Marsden, eds, 2003. *Agricultural policies and rural development in Europe*, Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Murdoch, J., 2000. Networks – A new paradigm of rural development? *Journal of Rural Studies*, 16(4), pp. 407–19.
- Ray, C., 2000. The EU LEADER Programme: Rural Development Laboratory. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 40(2), pp. 163–71.
- Rhodes, R., 1996. The new governance: Governing without government. *Political Studies*, XLIV, 652–67.
- , 1997. *Understanding Governance: Policy Networks, Reflexivity and Accountability*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

- Sáenz, C., 2011. Dinamización. In: Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Medio Rural y Marino. *LEADER en España (1991–2011). Una contribución activa al desarrollo rural*, Madrid: Red Rural Nacional, pp. 69–92.
- Scott, M., 2004. Building institutional capacity in rural Northern Ireland: the role of partnership governance in the LEADER II programme. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 20(1), pp. 49–59.
- Shortall, S., 2008. Are rural development programs socially inclusive? Social inclusion, civic engagement, participation and social capital: exploring the differences. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 24(4), pp. 1–8.
- Shortall, S., Shucksmith, M., 1998. Integrated Rural Development: Issues Arising from the Scottish Experience. *European Planning Studies*, 6(1), pp. 73–88.
- Shucksmith, M., 2000. Endogenous development, social capital and social inclusion: perspectives from LEADER in the UK. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 40(2) pp. 208–18.
- Shucksmith, M., Shortall, S., 2001. Rural Development in practice: Issues Arising in Scotland and Northern Ireland. *Community Development Journal*, 36(2), pp. 122–33.
- Sorensen, E., 2006. Meta-governance: the changing role of politicians in processes of democratic governance. *The American Review of Public Administration*, 36, pp. 98–114.
- Stoker, G., 1998. *Governance as theory: Five propositions*. *International Social Science Journal*, 50(155), pp. 17–28.
- Stone, C., 1989. *Regime Politics*, Kansas: University Press.
- Storey, D., 1999. Issues of Integration, Participation and Empowerment in Rural Development: The Case of LEADER in the Republic of Ireland. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 15(3), pp. 307–15.
- Thuesen, A.A., 2010. Is LEADER Elitist or Inclusive? Composition of Danish LAG Boards in the 2007–2013 Rural Development and Fisheries Programmes. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 50(1), pp. 31–45.