



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

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