



Stakeholder participation in planning rural development strategies: Using backcasting to support Local Action Groups in complying with CLLD requirements

Roberta Sisto^{a,*}, Antonio Lopolito^b, Mathijs van Vliet^c

^a Department of Economics, University of Foggia, Largo Papa Giovanni Paolo II, 1-71121 Foggia, Italy

^b Department of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences, University of Foggia, Via Napoli, 25-71122 Foggia, Italy

^c Wageningen University, Public Administration and Policy Group, Wageningen, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

In advanced countries, rural areas are a complex web of social, political and historical factors. In addition, several kinds of uncertainties are usually present. As a consequence, frequent mismatches arise in practise between measures and rural development goals and priorities. To overcome this pitfall, a key factor is represented by the acquisition of relevant knowledge from local stakeholders. In line with this idea, the European Commission encourages the Community-Led Local Development approach delivered by Local Action Groups. The aim of the study is to show the suitability of a participatory approach, namely backcasting, to the outline of the Local Action Plan of a specific LAG. Within this framework, a participative backcasting experience was carried out with the stakeholders of the LAG 'Daunia Rurale' in order to detect their needs and the strategic actions to carry out. The study provided stakeholders and policy makers with a rational approach and an operational tool to recognise the needs and design the actions for the specific endogenous potential of the investigated area. The proposed method proved to be rather innovative in CLLD contexts for the detection of expressed needs of local stakeholders and the definition of the LAP.

We submitted some questionnaires to stakeholders and looking at their results (either at the ones on the niceness of the workshop or at the strategy-validation ones), some encouraging remarks can be drawn. Backcasting has been particularly helpful to local stakeholders and decision makers in identifying the steps to give a clear direction to rural development. What we learn from this case study represents a valuable outcome that can support practitioners, policy makers and researchers in understanding how to design medium- to long-term planning development strategies in rural areas.

1. Introduction

In advanced countries, rural areas are a complex web of social, political and historical factors and processes in which the various groups of actors attempt to achieve outcomes that are commensurate with their aims (Terluin, 2003). In addition, several kinds of uncertainties (technology, market dynamics and economic constraints) are usually present while designing rural development plans (either at regional or Local Action Group level), where a number of different actors, processes and requirements need to be managed and included in the planning. As a consequence, frequent mismatches arise in practise between measures and rural development goals and priorities.

To overcome this pitfall, a key factor is represented by the acquisition of relevant knowledge from local stakeholders, usually embedded

and tacit. This can be achieved adopting participatory approaches that represent an opportunity to incorporate the perspectives and priorities of the local people (Bijlsma et al., 2011), reducing the risks associated with uncertainty and imperfect knowledge. In line with this idea, the European Commission (2014) encourages the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) approach that focuses on integrated area-based strategies for specific sub-regional territories. This approach is community led in the sense that it is delivered by Local Action Groups (LAG) made of representatives of local public and private actors.

As the vast array of literature on this topic indicates, there has been recent growth in experimentation with participatory methods (Holmberg and Robert, 2000; Kok et al., 2010; Ghişă et al., 2011; Strategea and Giaoutzi, 2012; Sisto et al., 2016; Sisto et al., 2017). One of the most suitable methods for complex contexts as rural areas is

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Roberta.sisto@unifg.it (R. Sisto), antonio.lopolito@unifg.it (A. Lopolito).

backcasting (Schoemaker, 1991; Peterson et al., 2003; Sisto et al., 2016). It starts by defining a desirable future and then works backward to outline actions that will connect that future to the present (Robinson, 2003). By identifying long-term solutions to societal problems, it leads to a sustainable development strategy.

The paper focuses on the reduction of the mismatches between policy measures and the needs of local communities. Therefore, the aim of the study is to show the suitability of backcasting to the outline of the Local Action Plan (LAP) of a specific LAG. Within this framework, a participative backcasting experience was carried out with the stakeholders of the LAG 'Daunia Rurale' in order to detect their needs and the strategic actions to carry out. In particular, the study provided stakeholders and policy makers with a rational approach and an operational tool to recognise the needs and design the actions for the specific endogenous potential of the investigated area.

The main expected impacts of the study rely on the capability of the proposed method: *i*) to explore the so-called 'embedded and tacit knowledge' detained by local stakeholders; *ii*) to reduce biased behavior due to bounded rationality and opportunism in identifying strategic actions by means of participatory interaction; *iii*) to systematise stakeholders' tacit knowledge within a rational framework. Finally, *iv*) the iterative nature of backcasting should improve the introspective ability of stakeholders.

The proposed method proved to be rather innovative in CLLD contexts for the detection of expressed needs of local stakeholders and the definition of the LAP.

In fact, despite the great interest shown by the Commission for community' involvement and local participation, and the promotion of participatory methodologies to design quality Local Development Strategies, this approach was never explicitly applied, to the outline of the Italian Regional Rural Development Programmes.

The paper opens with a brief view on the relevance of stakeholders' participation in local strategies' outline. A short literature review on normative scenarios is presented in Section 3. Then, section 4 focuses on the link between the CLLD concept and backcasting. Section 5 describes the backcasting experiment and its results. Finally, Section 6 contains some discussion and concluding remarks.

2. Stakeholder participation in local development strategies design

As highlighted by Macken-Walsh and Curtin (2012), the LEADER model was designed to operate on the basis of two principles: decision-making taking place as close as possible to the site of implementation (the principle of subsidiarity) and hierarchical decision-making structures being replaced by mechanisms involving representatives from a wide range of governmental and non-governmental groups (principle of partnership) (Osti, 2000). Therefore, the promotion of LEADER, attests the EU Commission's awareness that rural development involves "development by and of the local community, not just for it" (Moseley, 1997 p. 202) and the growing sense that decisions are more likely to succeed if locally and participatory made. This bottom-up approach is the central feature of the LEADER method and means that the local community has to be involved in the definition of rural development strategies.

The units targeted for this kind of intervention are the LAGs as local public-private partnerships among entrepreneurs, local authorities, rural associations, groups of citizens, voluntary organisations, etc.

Public participation has existed in the histories, politics and practices of European planning processes for a very long time. However, in the last 30 years, there has been a move away from top-down policies to promoting development through bottom-up, territorial approaches in which the human and social resources of localities are fully utilised. The development of such 'endogenous' approaches has, in part, been facilitated by the shift from hierarchical models of government to a system of 'governance' in which institutions and social relations better

utilise the endogenous local capacities (Furmankiewicz et al., 2010). The result has been new organisational structures, such as area-based, cross-sectoral partnerships that have attracted substantial academic and policy interest (Marsden and Murdoch, 1998). At the heart of the concept of the area-based partnership is the idea that territorial integration, the bringing together of different sectors and interests, is critical to achieving a more socially inclusive approach to rural development (Kovacs Katona et al., 2006).

There is a wealth of literature and guidelines on participatory methodologies that have contributed to a significant recognition of such approaches within different arenas of decision-making and research. Nevertheless, the field of public participation remains a fairly informal platform, in the sense that there is no formal body that oversees or regulates participatory processes (Patel et al., 2007).

The attention for stakeholders' participation has increased markedly in recent decades. In the context of public participation, a stakeholder can be defined as any person (or group) who has an interest in a specific policy issue or could be potentially affected by it. It concerns public institutions (as municipalities, universities, and other local governments), companies, NGOs and individual citizens. van de Kerkhof, (2006a) highlights three features of a stakeholder: *i*) stakeholders can be either individuals or organised groups, *ii*) different actors may have different perceptions of their own and each other's stakes (which may change over time), *iii*) the relevant group of stakeholders may vary. The number of stakeholders involved in a certain issue may change over time. As the policy process evolves, new stakeholders will enter the scene and others will leave.

Stakeholder groups are usually not homogenous entities. In fact, it is more likely that an identified 'stakeholder group' will comprise a diverse mix of individuals, who may – or may not – identify themselves with the particular 'stakeholder group' into which they have been categorised.

However, there is some criticism about stakeholders' participation (van de Kerkhof, 2006b). The most relevant opinions are that of Schumpeter (1942), who argues that average people are not very informed and rational with regard to most of the issues for which they could be called to contribute. In addition, Webler (1995) highlights, in the case of complex issues such as rural development, that stakeholders do not have the scientific knowledge about all of the issues they are discussing while, for Rosa (1998), most of the stakeholders could be affected by the 'Not In My Back Yard' (NIMBY) syndrome. In particular, it refers to a potential opportunistic behavior detainable by some stakeholders when involved in planning actions for local community wellbeing and development.

Notwithstanding, the added value of public participation lies in the ability of generating insights for the design of policies fitting the needs of those concerned. This depends on the possibility to share and complete the fragmented knowledge detained by each stakeholder to achieve a common view.

Public participation or 'public involvement' is understood in different forms that vary in the level of actual participant interaction and involvement. It could refer to processes that only facilitate a 'one-way' flow of information or, in contrast, to more interactive processes that can facilitate a 'two-way' flow. This last form can provide opportunities for discussion and deliberation, as well as opportunities to reach common ground (Patel et al., 2007).

Interactive participation, such as when the participants can engage directly with each other and the researchers or decision-makers, seeks to enhance the confidence of stakeholders, so to enable them to define, express and analyse their reality without reflecting the opinions of the stronger, more dominant voices (Patel et al., 2007; Wilson, 2013).

3. A methodological tool to help local stakeholders in complying with CLLD requirements

Although backcasting originated in the energy sector (Lovins, 1976;

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