

‘To Leader or not to Leader?’ Cases from Bulgarian, Romanian and Italian LAGs

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Rural development is often translated in concepts such as food chain organisation, social inclusion, sharing innovative and best practices, fostering integrated and multi-sectoral actions. The latest reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy have recognised the importance of innovation, cooperation and networking, but agricultural innovation systems need to be updated in order to reinforce the development of rural areas. Among the EU funded programs supporting a sustainable rural development, the LEADER Approach (Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale" which means, 'Links between the rural economy and development actions') has attempted to analyse and promote the specificities and peculiarities of European rural areas with an innovative participatory approach based on, 'participation', 'decentralization', 'partnership and collaboration'. The approach has been running for 20 years and plays a key role in development of European rural areas, however represents still a pretty new system for East-European countries such as Bulgaria and Romania. In this framework, is the LEADER approach the perfect tool to tackle the European rural development issues? This paper explores and compares the implementation of the LEADER approach in Bulgaria and Romania, comparing with Apulia region in Italy, through an analysis on Local Action Group (LAGs). The examined Local Action Groups deal with diverse challenges concerning the adoption of the LEADER approach, the composed partnerships, the available resources and, above all, the decision power capability on the local area. The analysis investigates the so called 'Leaderability' faced by the LAGs, with special regard to the main role they cover in the single local area, through a survey on 4 Romanian, 10 Bulgarian and 15 Italian LAGs. Results show whether the selected LAGs match with the LEADER features. We particularly emphasize the need to find a clear identity according to the diverse form they can shape, such as information diffusion centre, rural development agency or centre of expertise and competence with different autonomies and responsibilities for promoting innovation in agriculture and rural areas.

Background

Research on rural development is increasingly focused on the importance of the networkbased approach involving local stakeholders in supporting innovative ideas and strategies for development (Shortall 2008, Teillmann 2012, Dargan and Shucksmith 2008). Innovation has been the core concept behind the latest agricultural policy programmes. The shift from a 'linear' to a 'learning process' view of innovation, implied a huge change in rural development and also in agricultural extension services. Barke and Newton (1997) stress a change in rural development that 'implies a process of local mobilization and requires an organizational structure which brings together varied community interests to pursue agreed objectives, a locally agreed strategic planning process, and an agreed allocation of resources with the specific purpose of developing local capacity in terms of skills and competences' (Barke and Newton, 1997, p. 320).

The LEADER approach operates through the Local Action Group (LAG), born from the dialogue between civil, private and public individuals and/or organizations that bring together local development strategies (Kovach, 2000; Perez, 2000). These partnerships, widespread all over the Europe, receive financial support to develop and implement a local development strategy based on the LEADER approach. The main features are based on the following concepts: (i) area-based local development strategies, (ii) public-private partnerships, (iii) a bottom-up strategy, (iv) the implementation of innovative strategies, (v) the implementation of cooperative projects, (vi) a cross-sector approach and (vii) the networking of local partnerships (EC 2006, Art. 61). Moreover the added value of the local groups is a better identification with local needs and an increased capacity for innovation. Results show six Bulgarian cases, eleven Italians and one Romanian consider the LAG as rural development agency, mentioning that their current strategies, plans, resources and partnerships could fit with this model of Leaderability. It is the case that mostly reflects the functioning of the LAGs. Conversely three Bulgarian, three Romanian and two Italian LAGs see their activities more closer to the diffusion centre model. The Centre of expertise on management model, instead, has been chosen as fitting model only by two Italian cases, meanwhile there is just a Bulgarian LAG who states that is acting as Centre of competence on thematic strategies (bio-energy and alternative energy). At decision-making level, concerning the design and the implementation of local development strategies, all of the respondents assert that the bottom-up approach has been concretely implemented. According to the sample, Bulgarian LAGs work together with economics actors, local entities and cultural association more than farmers, rural women association and environmental groups. Romanian LAGs mainly work with economic actors and local entities; and finally, Italian ones mostly are composed by farmers' organizations and local entities. Finally, the capability of the partnership within the administrative

activity as well as in the financial and the strategies decision making, is suitable for all the LAGs activities and takes in account quality and quantity of human resources and management procedures

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