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Four ideal types for Leaderability: Cases from Local Action Groups

Abstract: *Among the European Union-funded programmes supporting development, the LEADER approach aims to promote the peculiarities of rural areas through an innovative participatory approach based on the following key words: participation, decentralisation, partnership and devolution of managerial functions to communities. The approach has been running for 20 years and plays a key role in the development of European rural areas; however, it is still a quite new system for East European countries. In this framework, is the LEADER approach the perfect tool to tackle European rural development issues? This paper explores and compares the implementation of the LEADER approach in Bulgaria, comparing it with Apulia region in Italy, through a web survey administrated to Local Action Groups (LAGs): respondents were 10 Bulgarian and 15 Italian LAGs. The surveyed LAGs deal with diverse challenges concerning the adoption of the LEADER approach, partnerships, available resources and, above all, decision power in the local area. The analysis investigates the so-called 'Leaderability' faced by the LAGs, focusing on the main role they cover in the local area: the aim is to examine whether the selected LAGs match with the LEADER features. The results show that most of the Bulgarian and Italians cases consider the LAG as a rural development agency by using strategies, resources and partnerships fitting with the model of Leaderability. The implications shed some light on the need to find a clearer identity according to the diverse LEADER ideal types they can shape, such as information diffusion centre or expertise and competence centre with different responsibilities.*

Keywords: LEADER approach, rural development, participation, innovation

Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005¹ deals with European Union (EU) rural development policy and its goals: improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector; improving the environment and the countryside; improving the quality of life in rural areas and encouraging diversification of the rural economy. Rural development is often translated into concepts such as food chain organisation, social inclusion, sharing innovative and best practices, fostering integrated and multi-sector actions. The latest reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) 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 through local stakeholders.

Rural development research is increasingly focused on the importance of the network-based approach involving local stakeholders in supporting innovative ideas and strategies for development (Dargan and Shucksmith, 2008; Shortall, 2008; Teillmann, 2012). 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 crucial change in rural development and also in agricultural extension services. Barke and Newton (1997, p. 320) stress a change in rural development that “implies a process of local mobilisation and requires an organisational 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”.

Then, among the EU-funded programmes supporting sustainable rural development, the LEADER approach (EC, 2006) has attempted to analyse and to promote the specificities and peculiarities of European rural areas with an innovative participatory approach based on ‘community-based initiatives’, ‘participation’, ‘decentralisation’, ‘partnership and collaboration’ (Ray, 2000; Shortall, 2008; Arabatzis et al., 2010). The importance of the LEADER method in the context of a local development strategy has been recognised across Europe and has been running for more than 20 years, achieving valuable results for the development of rural areas. Furthermore, it is necessary that some of the funds are used for projects based on the LEADER Community Initiatives. Every Member State was obliged to formulate a Rural Development Programme (RDP) for the 2007-2013 period, outlining goals that should be addressed, measures to be implemented and the amount of funding that will be spent on them (Kopeva et al., 2012).

Finally, the LEADER community initiative is based on the following principles of neo-endogenous and endogenous development: the bottom-up approach, participation in decision-making, public-private partnerships, inter-territorial

¹ Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 of 20 September 2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

cooperation, networks and innovation, integrated rural development, by improving the use of local assets and resources and the promotion of economic diversification (Navarro et al., 2015). The LEADER approach operates through the Local Action Group (LAG), born from the dialogue among civil, private and public individuals and/or organisations that bring together local development strategies (Kovach, 2000; Perez, 2000). These partnerships, widespread across Europe, receive financial support to develop and implement a Local Development Strategy (LDS) based on the LEADER approach. The added value of the LAGs is a better identification with local needs and an increased capacity for innovation. LAGs surely contribute to the success or failure of the programmes' implementation by achieving synergies to improve the sustainable and economic competitiveness of rural areas by means of strengthening cooperation between local actors, who often have little experience in networking (Fiore et al., 2014; Spada et al., 2016). The LEADER approach has been transposed by Member States in different ways and according to different political strategies for establishing 'action areas' (Lošťák and Hudečková, 2010; Strahl and Dax, 2011; Chevalier et al., 2012).

The initiative started with LEADER I (1991-1993) and II (1994-1999) and during the 2000-2006 programming period evolved into LEADER+. In the early stage, the initiatives were conceived as a laboratory to encourage the emergence and testing of new approaches to integrated and sustainable development and to influence, complement and/or reinforce rural development policy in the local community (Lukesch, 2007). Since its launch in 1991 by the European Commission as a Community Initiative, the LEADER approach has provided rural communities in the EU with a method for involving local partners in shaping the future development of their area. The LEADER approach has attracted a high level of interest within the EU and far beyond, not only in rural areas but also in urban and coastal areas. The early generations of LEADER received funding from the EU structural funds as a separate rural community initiative. The programme reached a 'maturity' phase in 2004-2006 and, since 2007, has been implemented under the Rural Development Programmes and co-funded under the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). The success of the initiative in rural areas led other EU Funds to open up the possibility of applying this approach to other types of areas. In the 2007-2013 period, it was successfully transferred to the European Fisheries Fund and nearly 2.500 LAGs were established during this programme. From 2014 it also became available in the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF). For this wider application the term 'Community-Led Local Development' (CLLD) is used for the current (2014-2020) programming period and represents an extension of the LEADER approach. Through the CLLD model, LAGs will be able to use a combination of different funds and different measures in order to implement their LDSs. This extension of LEADER activity has the potential to enable rural areas to develop the social capital and the common identity that underpin innovation, and pursue innovative solutions to local challenges through a far broader range of measures.

Accordingly, with the European initiative, LAGs are seen as ‘network of practice’ where local actors perform mutual learning and an integrated approach to address complex rural issues. Their key concepts rely on assembling people with various backgrounds, fostering a good communication and cooperative climate. The LAGs help to initiate innovative activities on the basis of a rural development strategy. They are a useful tool for the establishment of new relationships and partnerships between stakeholders, boosting the current rural areas (ENRD, 2013). The legal status could differ according to their partnership’s composition, mainly composed of public (local institution, municipalities, others such as parks and public consortia) and private actors (farmers’ associations, farmers, banks and so on). Primarily they answer to the innovation process’ construction demand. Indeed, their value and contribution to the development of rural areas under different perspectives is widely recognised: establishing new models of governance (Pemberton and Goodwin, 2010; Falkowski, 2013; Wellbrock et al., 2013), fostering diffusion of innovation and network (Esparcia, 2014) or measuring social capital (Shortall, 2008; Teilmann, 2012). Accordingly, the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD, 2013) highlights the need to overcome the disadvantages created by the lack of networks and cooperation in rural areas. The LAGs could potentially stimulate local market opportunities and add additional income to the local areas.

Methodology

The LEADER approach has the goal to encourage cooperation between representatives of three classes of local actors of the rural area: civil society, public administration and private sector (Falkowski, 2013). The LEADER Community Initiative has come into being also with a pedagogic function, seeking to introduce relational innovations in difficult areas characterised by a low development approach (Casieri et al., 2010; Chmieliński, 2011). Finally, a LAG can increase social capital and trigger virtuous development mechanisms based on the promotion of endogenous territorial resources and the participation of local communities in drawing up sustainable and shared development strategies (Casieri et al., 2010).

The so-called ‘Leaderability’ is a concept linked to a variety of factors under the LEADER approach. This analysis tries to work out whether a LAG contributes to local rural development through evaluation questions relating to the adoption of the LEADER approach. In order to examine this complexity, we used qualitative analysis to explore the implementation of the LEADER approach in Bulgaria and the Apulia region in Italy.

A web questionnaire entitled ‘The LAG’s contribution for rural development: the Leaderability’ was prepared and distributed to the 35 LAGs of Bulgaria and the 25 LAGs in the Apulia region as individuated on the EU LAGs website. A pre-validation survey was administrated to a sample of ten respondents (experts in rural development, EU politicians, those responsible for RDP plan-

ning, academic scholars etc.) in order to identify and to clarify issues related to the implementation of the research instrument and listing questions to be investigated. The questionnaire was composed of 20 questions and divided into the following eight sections:

- *Evaluation questions relating to the adoption of the LEADER approach:* during the elaboration of LDSs, the analysis of the Leaderability aims at understanding how the regulatory framework of the RDP gives power to LAGs in terms of strategies, organisational features, according to a 'genuine' LEADER approach. The identification of well-defined geographic territories is directly related to the percentage of success, in terms of operation and effectiveness of a LAG;
- *The territory:* the area covered by each LAG strategy must be uniform in terms of shared cultural identity, production specialisation and combination of physical characteristics in terms of natural endowment and infrastructures;
- *The partnership:* the area covered by each LAG strategy must be uniform in terms of shared cultural identity, production specialisation and combination of physical characteristics in terms of natural endowment and infrastructures;
- *The partnership in decision-making:* Pursuant to Article 62 of Regulation (EC) 1698/2005, the LAGs are groups representing partners from the various locally-based socioeconomic sectors in the territory concerned;
- *The regulatory framework:* The regulatory framework is constituted by several acts: the RDP, the approval on selection criteria for measures and 'not LEADER' tender notice, the announcements for the selection of LAGs, agreements on funding, agreements with funds delivery bodies, eventual guidelines etc.;
- *The available resources:* Relevant decisions concerning the LDS regard substantially the optimal allocation of public funds investments and then their conceivable leeway;
- *The LEADER fitness:* This term indicates different types of interventions associated with strategic components that are characteristics of the LEADER approach, as follows:
 - interaction between actors and projects of different sectors of the local economy;
 - implementation of innovative approaches;
 - implementation of cooperation projects;
 - networking of local partnerships.
- *Ideal type of Leaderability:* Starting from the National Rural Network report 'the Evaluation of the LEADER approach within the Rural Development Programmes 2007/2013: a methodology contribution' the following four models of Leaderability were identified and proposed: (1) The LAG as involvement and information diffusion centre (limited decision making power); (2) The LAG is moving towards the rural development agency identity (full decision power capability and autonomy); (3) Centre of ex-

expertise on management and administrative practices (limited autonomy with regard to pathways of developments identifications); (4) Centre of competence on thematic strategies (high strategic capability but no specific realisation responsibility).

The questions were structured open, closed and 5-point Likert scale questions. Every question aimed at responding to our research objective. Before each question, a little introduction was given in order to clarify the mean of the question. A trick control question was added for the reliability of the test responses (Oppenheimer et al., 2006). The tested assumption is the following: LAG respondents meet the criteria of having some responsibility in implementing the Leaderability at any extent. Only 10 Bulgarian (about 30 per cent) and 15 Italian LAGs (60 per cent) responded correctly. As the sample has not been stratified but depended on the full response, our data do not aim to be fully representative of EU LAGs.

Results

Territory, partnership and regulatory framework

In the first part of the questionnaire we focus on suitable territories. The respondents agree that the area covered by all LAGs strategy is uniform in terms of shared cultural identity, production specialisation and combination of physical characteristics in terms of natural endowment and infrastructures. In particular, the Bulgaria LAGs highlight that their area is covered 90 per cent by plains and the main production specialisation is agriculture (53 per cent production of maize, wheat, and sunflowers and 30 per cent production of oil plants): the gap is about the infrastructure that it is not so good, but in progress. The strength is cultural heritage with its churches and traditions, industrial tourism and energy innovations.

The unique geology, the hilly and the mountainous terrain of the Western Balkans is a prerequisite for the great diversity of flora and fauna of the area and by meeting the criteria of the Natura 2000 network. Within the LAG areas six protected areas were registered. Finally, the entire territory shares common natural-economic characteristics and social problems mainly because the economic crisis that developed new problems and perspectives. Indeed, the traditional territory of the agrarian sector over the years has undergone a severe crisis and a number of structural transformations, from which recovery is slow and difficult. Economic indicators are characterised by very low values to be maintained throughout the whole period since 2001. There is evidence that the sector is beginning to recover, albeit only step by step. The modernisation of the sector is gradually but very slowly profiting from the gradual absorption of EU funds for rural development and schemes for direct payments to farmers.

Uncertainty arises from one Italian LAG, regarding the potential and uniformity of the local territories: “In our area there is a certain homogeneity in terms of production specialisation, mostly in agriculture. In other sectors, including the third one, there is a strong discrepancy between the various municipalities of the LAG”.

The partnership composition in the Bulgarian cases is in line with the whole sample. Panagyurishte, Strelcha and Lesichovo LAGs stated that the components of the partnership are villages, NGOs, public and private partners and SMEs that are very important for the territory and the LDS is built in implementation of the public and private interest. Therefore, the remainder of the LAGs strongly approved that the partnership is composed of public and private actors, in order to collect a balanced and representative series of the different socioeconomic players of the territory. From the Italian LAGs a strong accent on the importance of national entities appear because it plays a decisive role in the social structure of many groups: “Although ‘formal’ partnership of the LAG contains several actors representing various local economic sectors, in practice the public component has greater voting and decision power. This condition does not allow the full expression of the private party”.

Some differences between Italian and Bulgarian LAGs were revealed by the survey. In Bulgaria, the partnership consists of much more rural women’s associations and cultural associations than in Italy. It would be in line with the stated need of achieving the involvement of the different genders in agriculture, and so it is based on the same reason why the EU has been providing more financing support to female agricultural entrepreneurship than male for several years. On the other hand, Italian LAGs display a more prominent presence of farmer organisations than do the Bulgarian ones.

At the decision-making level, concerning the design and the implementation of LDSs, all respondents assert that the bottom-up approach has been concretely implemented. According to the sample, Bulgarian LAGs work together with economic actors, local entities and cultural associations more than with farmers, rural women association and environmental groups.

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 into account quality and quantity of human resources and management procedures. Tinutul Barsei LAG adds: “Sometimes, a ‘resources organisation’ with strong expertise could be a critical success factor,” but often in the LAGs “there are poorly qualified people in the regions and it is very difficult to organise the community”. Anyway, many local operators have received EU funding, which increases the possibility to consider different innovative projects in partnership.

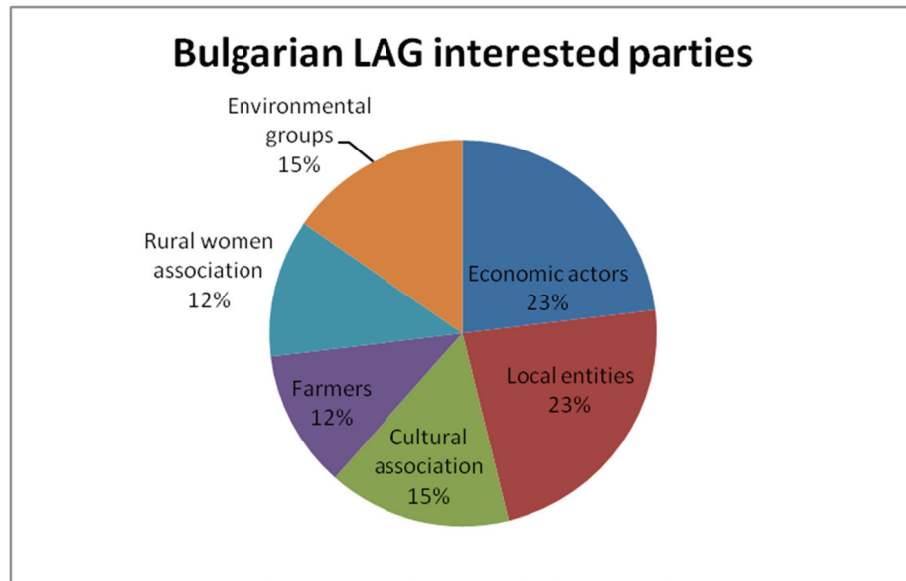


Figure 1. Bulgarian LAG partnership composition

Source: own data.

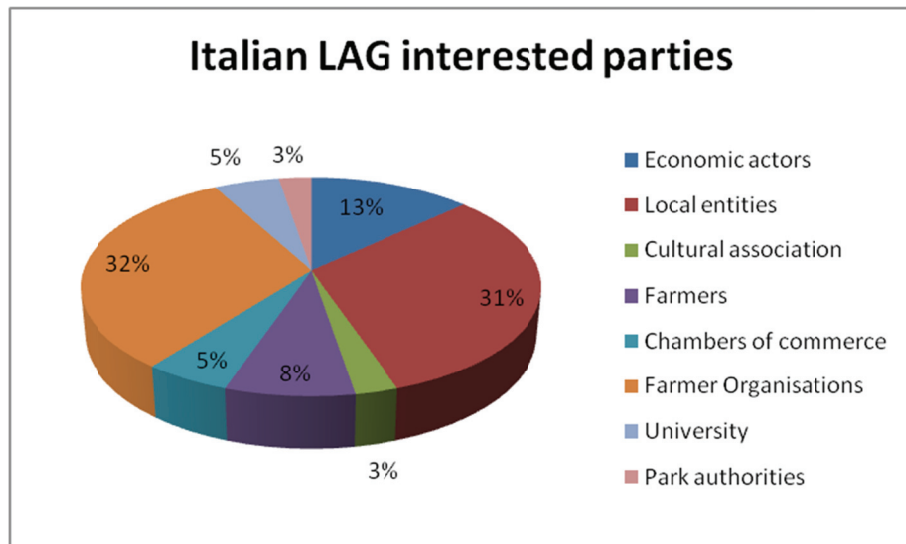


Figure 2. Italian LAG partnership composition

Source: own data.

Bulgarian respondents agree that the LAG is able to elaborate specific LDSs according to their resources and time availability, being also able to establish selection criteria on best investments which are coherent with planned strategies. More doubts are expressed from the Italian LAGs referring to the human

resources' contract and on the selection criteria: "We are trying to increase the staff, but there is uncertainty surrounding the next programming phase" and "The autonomy of the LAGs in the definition of calls for proposals and project selection criteria should be recognised".

The LEADER fitness and four ideal types

The second part of the questionnaire focuses on different types of interventions associated with strategic components that are characteristics of the LEADER approach, as follows:

- The interaction between actors and projects of different sectors of the local economy;
- Implementation of innovative approaches;
- Implementation of cooperation projects;
- Networking of local partnerships.

The results show that the LAGs promote and carry out a synergic interaction between operators and stakeholders, policies and territorial resources, for the majority of the respondents, involving them through meeting and creating trust. "Meetings with the private and public sectors are held constantly. The economic sector is growing and the LEADER approach is a great opportunity for them".

Innovation is also a key word in the planning activities and on the implementation of new projects. Most of the interviewed LAGs show relevant interest in new methods of divulgation and formation: "We want to improve the quality of life of our population and try to understand their needs. In order to do that we do door-to-door meetings to promote our LAG's actions". "We aim at organising and promoting workshops and seminars among companies active in the same sector (speed business dates)". "We intend to analyse the 'Albergo Diffuso' model and to implement it in our territory".

The cooperation topic, conversely, presents different answers. Fifty per cent of the Italian respondents answer 'yes' to the question related to the occurrence of networks with local partnerships. Most of them refer to collaboration among different LAGs, universities and national partnerships. In the Bulgarian cases, it seems that networking and cooperation are strongly present in the territory, specially between LAGs (nine Bulgarian cases out of ten, said that they have at least one project going on with other LAGs).

The final section of the questionnaire depicts four ideal types of Leaderability from the National Rural Network report referred to above. We found that six Bulgarian and eleven Italian cases consider the LAG as a 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 and two Italian LAGs see their activities closer to the diffusion centre model. The centre of expertise on management model, on the other hand, has been chosen as the relevant model only by two Italian cases, meanwhile there is just one Bulgarian LAG who states that it is acting as a centre of competence on thematic strategies (bio-energy and alternative energy).

Discussion

The paper aimed at investigating the ‘soul’ of the LAGs comparing to the Leaderability: certainly, the LEADER approach has been implemented by local actors following the main European principles. The latter are clearly identified as pillars underpinning local growth (Lukesch, 2007) and are based on the ideas of cooperation, forecasting spread of innovations and setting up networks. Over time, the LEADER approach has been implemented through three different plans: LEADER I, LEADER II and LEADER+. The success of those initiatives led to a more complex and ambitious plan, the so-called Community-Led Local Development. These events have produced many efforts by local actors to address EU policies toward the above-mentioned purposes, emphasising cooperation and uniform results from all EU Member States (EC, 2014). Clearly, LAGs’ activities aim at achieving the final goal of sustainable growth (EC, 2014). In this study, our questionnaires highlighted there is a certain homogeneity in the primary sector in terms of production. Different evidence comes from the secondary and third sectors: it means that LAGs’ efforts have been focused on rural and agricultural issues, not taking sufficiently into account the industrial and services sectors. This is a crucial point due to it revealing a weak integration and collaboration among those different players, and so it is in contrast with the key features of the LEADER approach.

Instead, according to the composition of involved partners, the comparison between Italian and Bulgarian LAGs depicts an alignment of local actors’ morphology to EU integration policies. In fact, the latter aim at fulfilling larger social and economic homogeneity that would cover larger area than that within national border one (Doitchinova, 2012). In this regard, the emerged data are much more relevant because of countries showing more relevant diversity from EU standards (by international agreements); that is precisely the eastern EU Member States. A prominent presence of local entities, mostly identified as public entities, emerges both in Italian and Bulgarian LAGs. Notwithstanding the mentioned homogeneity on partnership composition, it results in a stronger influence that public entities have in practice at the decision-making phase than from the other participants (Navarro, 2015).

A little difference has arisen between two selected samples, but the CLLD plan should lead players towards a major convergence because of changes from ‘linear’ to ‘learning processes’ on which it is based. Meanwhile, farmer organisations, which are well-known as many farmers in agreement to share and cope

challenges, organised in a single entity called ‘farmers’ organisations’ (FAO, 2015), are considerable in terms of presence in Italian LAGs. This means that the national agro-sector has been building up a significant cooperative structure in order to face international market challenges. Thus, farmers’ organisations play an active role in addressing LDSs through their role in LAGs. Bulgaria’s farms are ‘younger’ than those in Italy and similar structures are yet unknown.

Discrepancy in partnership composition depends also on the arising economic and financial crisis that has stressed local market features, raising problems unknown earlier. Consequently, local needs have changed and players have had to establish new prerequisites on which to implement their LDSs. The international crisis has weakened local economic potential and people were not ready to tackle it. Another weak point is related to the capability to involve new human resources. In Italy, the main cause is the lack of freedom to select and employ resources. Then the necessity emerges to be much more autonomous in order to make faster decisions and not to postpone important activities. Conversely, in Bulgaria, LAGs can manage human resources independently and access new human resources rapidly.

After evaluating the composition of LAGs and consequent implications, the survey collected data on the fitness of actions carried out by local players with the concept of Leaderability. The meaning of this word is strictly related to capabilities of the LEADER plans (EC, 2014) to achieve the goals that inspire them. In this regard, Leaderability shows how these initiatives solved critical points that affected territories for many years. Following this framework, it has been observed that connections and synergies among private and public actors have been engaged enough, even though the prominent influences of public operators play a significant role (Doitchinova, 2012) in implementing strategies, reducing the bottom-up approach. The success of relationships engaged by players depends on new methods to implement divulgation of the activities carried out and to train operators. On the other hand, innovations represent important drivers to lead changes in such methodologies. In this way, attention has been placed on the ‘Albergo Diffuso’ model. It consists in living territories as unforgettable and unique experience that would come from typical characterising values on which geographical areas are identified. Hence, the territory concept brings together tangible and intangible aspects, returning added value to local citizens. However, in front of the positive results, there are some weaknesses related to the cooperation among Italian partners (there is a reduced number of partners, that are universities and national partnerships). An international cooperation should establish robust and lasting networks (EC, 2014). In other words, interactions among players allow, in turn, cooperation that facilitates the ideation and implementation of innovations, which, finally, can be spread by networks.

The last part of the survey was focused on the identification of ideal type matching LAGs experiences with ideal type identified from the National Rural Network report previously mentioned. What transpires is in line with previ-

ous considerations concerning the composition of LAG partnerships where the presence of local public entities and farmers was prominent. In fact, among the others, the rural development agency is the answer mostly indicated by respondents. This ideal type entails that LAGs should appear as agencies where actors address policies and introduce their developing proposals. It is the type through which the implementation of planned activities is much more feasible due to main associated features recognise powerful ability and autonomy in decision making. Conversely, several individuals perceive LAGs as diffusion centres with limited decision-making power. Local development is strictly related to the capacity of LAGs to take decisions and, in this case, the bottom-up approach builds constraints to making them quickly. Yet, involving more and more actors means to deeply understand and collect local needs. In addition, interviewees disagree with the idea of identifying LAGs as research institutions as, for example, universities, and so, few respondents agree with centre of expertise on management or centre of competence on thematic strategies. One of the main points pursued by Europe addresses concerns networking between local growth and local expertise having suitable knowledge to trigger it in order to increase critical mass (Carree, 2012). Over the years, researchers have developed increasing capabilities related to agricultural and rural issues, but they regularly remained within the academic milieu (Muscio and Pozzali, 2012), resulting in the absence of sharing and implementation of acquired knowledge with the world of enterprise. Therefore, policies undertaken on territories should be much more oriented in involving high competences coming from research entities (Blagoeva-Yarkova, 2012). Paying attention to all emerging data, it is necessary to bring together the absence of cooperation concerning, above all, human resources in research with the ideal type identified in the rural development agency. In this way, the rural development agency should involve researchers in order to strengthen potential action in local territories and to conform local action to EU development guidelines.

However, what should be clearly affirmed is that there is a limit deriving from the size of the sample. This, in turn, means that the results presented here have to be interpreted with some caution. This work, notwithstanding its limitations, can be a good starting point for giving new insights on the type of Leaderability rooted in EU LAGs.

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