

DEFINITION OF A BOTTOM-UP RURAL DEVELOPMENT MODEL AS A GOVERNANCE INSTRUMENT FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AREAS. THE CASES OF TWO LOCAL ACTION GROUPS (LAGS) IN EMILIA-ROMAGNA REGION AND PUGLIA REGION

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SUMMARY

The present research explores the comparative evolution of rural development policies in Italy using a multi-level governance framework. It highlights the increasing importance of a bottom-up development approach and allows us to explore governance issues of how this process can benefit both the policy making and the rural development outcomes. More specifically, the study draws on the experience of two public private partnerships in order to understand the conditions, including political arrangements and actors, that facilitate or hinder the development and their workings, and evaluates the added value that flows from the bottom-up approach to local development process of the areas they serve compared to the more conventional way.

Despite their inherent diversity, these local partnership actors work together within a common governance framework for rural development.

In this context, the European Union's LEADER approach (*Liaison entre action de développement de l'économie rurale*) is a tool designed to generate the development of rural areas at local level. The approach does this through Local Action Groups (LAGs) and in particular their local partnerships. They operate within a structure and are responsible for devising and implementing development strategies for their areas by gathering consensus, openness and local people invitation to participate. However, there still exists a limited understanding and knowledge about how the partnerships work in practice, the perceived benefits and project planning. Despite the generation of many studies on rural partnerships, relatively few have focused on their processes, as the impact of rural policies depends not only on the local context of a rural area (including its economic, social and environmental conditions) but also on the logic of how the partnership works.

1. Introduction

This paper, using the multi-level governance framework (MLG), conducts a comparative analysis of the experience of two EU LEADER LAGs/public private partnerships operating in Italy (Delta 2000 LAG – Emilia Romagna Region and Capo Santa Maria di Leuca LAG – Puglia Region) in order to understand the conditions, including political arrangements and actors, that facilitate the development of the partnerships and their operation in the 2007-2013 programming period. This study therefore has the following primary research question. Using the MLG approach, what are the conditions that facilitate the LAG approach, which flows from the bottom-up and utilises partnership approaches. The core argument is that the partnership approach inherent in the LAG approach has given the rural development actors a governance platform to help increase beneficial interactions and economic activity in each of these LAGs, but it is the bottom up leadership of key local actors, seizing opportunities provided the EU funding which have been the most important factors.

Although the existence of EU guidance on rural partnerships creation means that the LAGs exhibit many similar characteristics, each LAG has its own history and specific way to approach local partnership working. This is due to the national and local context, particularly in relation to the political and the local management structures and the power distribution within the local government (Derkzen P.,2010). The ability of the actors to affect the policy-making processes varies as a consequence of factors, such as the

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existing cultural values, institutionalized policy practices, ideas and finally the regulations to be implemented. LAGs governance can be considered as the pooling of resources in terms of local interest to face economic and social challenges within the rural area. The LEADER approach is intended to serve as an effective regulatory framework process. It is first established at EU level to ensure an integrated and cooperative approach and then it passes to the member states that receive guidelines for its implementation in line with the EU legislation. The LAG formation process at the local level is guided by each individual member state albeit under the observance of the Commission. This ensures that the state has a position to be able to shape the policy process of the partnership despite the discourses emphasizing the potential principles of participation and great optimism.

Although researchers have carried out studies of these partnerships in EU states, there have been no detailed empirical and comparative studies of their specific nature and context since 2001. As this was an under-researched area, I position my study to fill in this research gap in the literature, to provide some original empirical research and to aim to update the comparative analysis and outputs of the PRIDE Research Project (*Partnerships for Rural Integrated Development in Europe*, Esparcia J., et al., 2000). This Project was carried out during the period 1999-2001 and brought together researchers to establish what was known about rural development partnerships in eight EU countries (United Kingdom, Finland, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Ireland, Luxembourg) in order to identify the key aspects of their emergence, organization, management and performance. The study represents a pioneering attempt to evaluate the role of partnerships. The research findings provided evidence of the European and national policies' role in establishing partnerships for rural development and highlights similarities and differences of the political-economic and institutional contexts between the eight countries. However, according to Larner (2004), '*(t)he weakness of the PRIDE research programme ... is the apparent lack of theoretical framework that would generate more rigorous analysis of the empirical research findings ... The PRIDE research programme clearly has the potential to make a major contribution to the rapidly growing academic and policy literature on partnerships, however the analytical work required to distil and highlight this research contribution has not yet been done*' (page 377). Moreover, according to Bristow (2001, page 88), '*there is no reference to the concept of governance...in terms of capturing the systemic interconnectedness among government, civil society and the modes of political and economic coordination*' (page 88).

Thus, I decided that, given the limited knowledge about local partnerships working in rural development and the characteristics of local partnership practice and capability to deliver rural development, this research has the aim to fill this gap through a comparative analysis, providing a detailed exploratory study focusing on the longitudinal observation of case studies.

In order to establish the implications of the LAG practices for rural development through a case study approach, the following main objectives for this research have been established: 1) to explore the utility of EU strategies for rural development; 2) to explain how the LAG structure and the institutional arrangements are positioned in the layers of Multi-Level Governance framework when managing rural development; 3) to carry out a comparative evaluation of the LAGs working in the different nations and their subnational contexts.

With respect to my research, I have identified four key secondary questions to help me achieve these aims and answer the primary research question. These are as follows:

1. What are the key characteristics of the LAGs working mechanisms employed to address rural development?
2. What are, in practice, the processes involved in and the outcomes associated with LAGs working in rural development?
3. What conclusions do we draw about the emergence, operation and performance of local partnerships?
4. What is the added value of the LAGs that flows from the bottom-up and partnership approach to local development process of the areas they serve compared to more conventional governance approaches?

The mechanisms and processes characterizing the partnership are deduced from the literature review, an examination of documents, the use of semi-structured open-ended interviews with a variety of key actors, and attendance at LAG meetings. Relying essentially on individual perceptions and written sources, and

given the issues that characterise the investigation of partnership practice (including for example such issues as 'motivation', 'representation', 'mobilisation' and 'interaction'), the analysis of the material collected is predominantly of a qualitative nature.

In adopting this perspective, a particular attention was given to a variety of issues including the context within which the practice is taking place, and the reasons, influences and factors that contributed to the initiation of the practice of local partnerships. The paper particular considers these issues:

- the organisation, structuring, and management of the local partnership practice;
- the partners, their motivations, involvement, role and actions;
- the place and scale of the local partnership practice as well as the difficulties and constraints of this practice.

In addition, the empirical research is concerned with examining and describing the outcomes of the practice of local partnership, both expected and resultant, reflecting the views and attitudes of the partners involved.

Since the multi-level governance academic literature has very little focus on these types of rural partnerships, I will provide empirical data that will serve as the basis for my analysis of the LAGs governance and creating my own narrative.

2. The Multi-level Governance framework

Multi-level Governance (MLG) is one of the few theoretical approaches to analyse the EU integration processes that can be considered as the appropriate for understanding the LEADER approach; the other integration theories tend to not to emphasize the relevance of the sub-national and the local level (Kull, M., 2007). Initially intended to analyse the multiple levels and actor interactions within the EU Regional Policy, research on MLG has been extended to study a great number of additional fields such as economic, environmental and mainly rural development, the latter being largely absent from the debates in the context of European integration studies.

The MLG analysis claims that the EU is a polity where authority moves beyond the formal state institutions and policy-making processes; it emphasizes the power sharing between multiple layers of government including the European, national and subnational levels as well as more horizontal interactions among actors (Hooghe, L. (1996).

In 1993, Gary Marks, who was one of the 'pioneers' in conceptualizing multilevel governance within the EU and on Structural Funds implementation, demonstrated that a variety of levels are involved and that there is no uniformity among the states as to the involvement of these subnational actors in European integration.

Marks puts forward his theory of multilevel governance '*as a system of continuous negotiating among nested governments at several territorial tiers – supranational, national, regional, local – as a result of a broad process of institutional creation and decisional reallocation that has pulled some previously centralized functions of the state up to the supranational level and some down to the local regional level*'. (Marks, 2003, page 392). These tiers interact with each other '*at different administrative and territorial levels: (i) across different ministries and/or public agencies at the central government level (upper horizontally), (ii) between different layers of government at local, regional, national and supranational levels (vertically) and (iii) across different actors at subnational level (lower horizontally)*' (Charbit, C., 2011).

The point of departure is the following: the presence of overlapping competencies, the interaction of political actors among multiple levels of governments and the member state not acting as the exclusive link between domestic politics and EU level. Marks argued that EU Structural Funds and the Cohesion policy of the 1980s and 1990s provided evidence that central governments were losing control to the European Commission which played a fundamental role in designing and implementing the funds and to the regional and local governments of each member state which were granted a partnership role. (Wallace, H. et al., 2005).

Thus, it is not just member states involved in implementing EU regulations but also local administrations operating under the influence of the EU. Neglecting the inclusion of the local level in the framework of European integration theories means excluding an important and vital level of governance within the European Union.

Local authorities have responsibilities in implementing programmes, and in several member states they act as managing authorities of the funds. Decentralization of power to sub-national and local levels in implementing the Structural funds improves the resource management of the community participation as it has the advantage that local actors know the local needs much better than others for the development of their local areas (Muhammad, S. A., Noraini Bt. A. T., 2011). This means that decisions are made by institutions that are close to local residents and *'Regional, national and supranational authorities profit from the fact that local peculiarities might be taken into consideration more effectively and they can rely on endogenous knowledge...Thus, Structural policy is not only meant to distribute funds but support structural cohesion'* (Kull, M., 2014, page 52).

In addition, governance at this level involves not only public administration but also representatives from the private sector such as economic and social representatives. These actors come from different backgrounds, originate from different levels, share competencies, are dependent on each other and are organized or try to exert influence on three levels of administration: supranational, national and sub-national.

Moreover, being the lowest level of the EU, it is the closest to the local residents and enables them to have access to and to participate in policy-making processes and interact with governmental institutions at all levels and has also the potential to make the EU visible at to the local level and to the local residents that have access to policy-making.

In an attempt to define the theoretical space within which the inter-governmental relations emerge in the EU cohesion policy, Hooghe and Marks (2003) label two types of MLG: Type-I MLG and Type-II MLG. Type-I MLG regards general-purpose jurisdictions – international, national, regional, local - between a limited number of government levels over a given territory or a set of issues. Under this Type, the jurisdictions are divided into units, each with separate and independent powers and policy responsibilities. The structure is divided into an executive, an elected legislature with representative institutions and a judiciary with a court system. In this form of governance, there is only one relevant jurisdiction, which is intended to be stable for periods of several decades. To exemplify general-purpose jurisdiction in Type-I MLG, one might look at the stable structures of the municipalities, which are responsible for a variety of different tasks, such as social policy, local planning or environmental protection.

Type-II MLG is distinctly different. The jurisdictions are task specific and are intended to be flexible to respond to changing functional requirements rather than durable ones. Jurisdictions are fragmented into functionally specific units and provide particular public services at local level, such as police, fire protection, welfare and health and transportation. Each public service has a jurisdiction which internalizes its benefits and costs. In this Type, there is no predominant class of actors but a wide variety of public and private actors sharing the same geographical space and a common need to take collective decisions or to solve coordination problems. Individuals relate to jurisdictions such as professionals, farmers, homeowners, nature lovers, shoppers and so forth. Jurisdictions may be created, adjusted or deleted when these jurisdictions no longer serve the stakeholders' needs, through inter-jurisdictional competition for citizens' participation or dues.

A prime example of a task-specific jurisdiction in Type-II MLG are the LAGs engaged in LEADER approach at the local level to deal with particular policy-tasks and to receive EU funds. *'These groups include a variety of public, private and social actors and membership is open. In contrast, a municipality stretches over a certain geographical area and is non-intersecting as regards other levels of governance. Another important difference is the constitutional structure. In contrast to Type-I MLG, Type-II has neither a legislative nor a judicative body'* (Kull, M. 2014, page 29).

Moreover, Type-I jurisdictions bundle decision making at a few levels as they are at the heart of democratic elections, legislatures and executives, and they support a class of professional politicians that mediate citizen preferences into law. In contrast, Type-II jurisdictions are set up to solve policy problems, such as managing a common pool resource, and setting a technical standard. A Type-II MLG can be economically more effective with problem solving taking place at the very level of concern; it is also more adaptive in response to changing preferences and open to innovation and it is closer to people and, at least theoretically, offers space for them to participate.

According to Bache et al. (2012), in Type-I jurisdictions there are some deficits that have negative effects on legitimacy and democracy in terms of incomplete information, coordination among decision-making jurisdictions and networks, policy formulation and decision-blocking by higher level administrations. For

instance, concerning information, not all actors such as municipalities in EU regional policy, who should have the same starting position, are equally informed in order to be able to participate. This is not only due to information deficits, but also due to their lack of financial and human resources. Indeed, they hypothesise that, although local actors from different levels are expected to participate in policy-making in Type-II jurisdictions, not all of them are included in the process of decision-making. The inclusion of individuals at the local level however can take place during the input phase of policy-making that is the formulation about the local strategies and even more during the implementation phase when the concrete realization of certain projects by functional units such as LAGs are open to individuals' participation. Thus, in case of EU funded programmes and more specifically in case of LEADER approach implementation, this means that EU can be more easily and directly experienced by its citizens. This is not only in terms of participatory forms of democracy but also, and probably more importantly, in terms of legitimizing the functions of EU institutions and public-private interaction which brought concrete results to the local level (Lorvi, K., 2014).

Finally, Type-II MLG jurisdictions borrow some of the legitimacy, consensus and accountability mechanisms from Type-I jurisdictions: they also attempt to create mechanisms of their own. Type-I MLG jurisdictions legitimacy derives from the procedures by which they are regulated such as roles and norms while the legitimacy of Type-II MLG jurisdictions depends on their effectiveness and the competences of their management. According to Pierre and Peters (2000), these two types of governance are in a 'negotiated order' where the institutional level, in this case the European Union, tries to get these newer forms of governance inserted into a context, which is still dominated by existing institutions.

3. The implementation of the EU LEADER approach in Italy and the LAG case studies selection.

Few systematic studies have been carried out on the implementation of the EU rural development policy in Italy with a focus on LEADER approach apart from the internal implementation and evaluation reports conducted by regional and national institutions. According to Osti (2000) *'the reason is that it is not possible yet to generalize about the experience of development processes at local level...as...there is an indeterminacy in the models used to analyze LEADER and a slowness to elaborate new ones'* (page 174).

By analyzing some publications on the topic, certain observations at a general level can be made about the Italian experience within LEADER and the working of its LAGs.

Quantitatively, after the significant growth in the number registered in Italy from LEADER I to LEADER II (29 to over 200), the number of LAGs decreased to 131 in LEADER+ and then further increased to 194 in the 2007-2013 period. In terms of quality, however, special attention should be paid to the changes that have occurred in the nature and functions of local partnerships, especially in the most recent period. As regards to their nature, local partnerships have gone, on the one hand, in the direction of a greater balance between the public and private side and on the other, to a wider representation of different local interests, with a growing involvement of more people coming from outside the agricultural sector and resulting in a diversification of the internal composition. Concerning the functions of the LAGs in the local context, it should be noted that they, as the managers of the funds at local level, have become, in many cases, real development agencies with objectives and strategies that are certainly governing the use of funds allocated by LEADER.

The study has deliberately selected two Italian regions, Emilia-Romagna region and Puglia region which in the last decades have both witnessed a wide application of local partnership for addressing rural development. Rural policies in both regions are negotiated and delivered at a more decentralized level through partnerships that have some power over domestic and European funding for rural development management.

The motivation for carrying out a case study of the politics and rural development in Emilia Romagna is based on the evidence produced by more than thirty years of research on Italian regions which shows that the region remains at the forefront of institutional performance and innovation at national and European level. Emilia Romagna is *'among the richest Regions in Italy and represents the so-called 'third Italy', whose economic development is based on the interlinking of small agricultural and industrial enterprises...with a fully decentralized system of governance in which the Provinces have a more significant role in the different stages of policy design and implementation'* (OECD, 2009, page 108). The region has a history of cooperative movements which are at the base of the so-called 'Modello Emilia' (Emilia Model). This model reflects a strong multi-level governance system with devolution of planning and implementation activities to

provinces according to the regional law no. 15/97. One of the hypotheses put forward to explain the performance of Emilia-Romagna is that of rich social solidarity expressed in mass organization such as trade unions, co-operatives and mutual aid societies and the support of mass political organizations such as the Communist party. This is the Putnam hypothesis (1994).

The Local Action Groups in this region are considered by the Rete Rurale Nazionale (National Rural Network) to be those with the most political and functional autonomy as they were given the capacity to choose either the eligible municipalities where to intervene as the socio-economic fields of intervention. Furthermore, the capacity to combine the political and functional autonomy gives LAGs an institutional prestige because they are considered as competent by the regional administration and by local stakeholders (Mantino, F. 2009).

Concerning southern Italy, Puglia region distinguishes itself by being one of the most advanced southern regions in implementing a bottom-up approach that considers the aspect of rurality in terms of territorial concentration, with partnerships at local level, between the different levels of local government and socio-economic actors and at vertical level between government and institutions. The integrated planning represents a change from the top-down approach to rural development policies; the planning responds not only to economic objectives but it is also a change in the direction of more participation and cooperation among local public and private actors.

In these different contexts, the Delta 2000 LAG in Emilia-Romagna and Capo Santa Maria di Leuca LAG in Puglia represent successful implementation experiences of the LEADER approach because they succeeded in stimulating self-governance processes by involving the local population, the private operators and the local authorities along with higher institutional levels.

The empirical findings for each case study are based on fieldwork through data collection and appropriate analysis (interpretation and reporting techniques that are not available from any other source), as well as involving open-ended, qualitative interviews with local officials and other potentially important actors, observation at partnership meetings and document collection (administrative documents, feasibility reports, progress and evaluation reports, correspondence, minutes of meetings, newspaper/magazine articles).

The first part of the empirical work was a desk-based review of the differing policy contexts of the last 20 years; the material found helped to explain the differences in the asset-based tools and the approaches used in Emilia – Romagna and in Puglia. The second part of the empirical effort consisted of fieldwork involving interviews, observation at meetings and documentary analysis. This investigation allowed the identification of various explanations for the recent increase in the practice of local partnership in rural development, which are mainly associated with the local context of the rural development process in terms of opportunities, the issues to be addressed, and the mobilization of local actors.

Particular attention was given to a variety of issues including: the reasons and factors attributed to the initiation of the partnership, the organization and management of the local partnership practice, the partners and their motivation and involvement, the difficulties and constraints, their workings and the added value to the development of the rural areas they serve. The cases allowed a focused comparison of the rural areas in terms of similarities and differences and involve isolating key elements, common points and differences, as well as the evaluation of the European, national and local level politics.

Some significant findings from the case studies are summarized in relation to these themes: the outcomes, achievements and benefits that could be attributed to the local partnerships working in rural development and what constitutes the limits to the local partnership practice to achieve the objectives of their local development strategies. In addition, as the fieldwork concerns the examination and description of the outcomes of the local partnerships practice, the intention is to throw further light on the key issues of their formation and operation in rural development.

3.1 The case of Delta 2000 LAG in Emilia-Romagna Region

3.1.1 General context

The territory of the Delta 2000 LAG is located between the provinces of Ferrara and Ravenna along the delta of the river Po. The area of approximately 717 square miles with a population of more than 100,000 people and includes 19 municipalities (13 municipalities in the province of Ferrara and 6 in the province of

Ravenna) that are partly or entirely within the Po Delta Regional Park area of the Emilia-Romagna region. This is one of the most interesting environmental areas in Europe, situated in a valley where the river Po runs. It is a natural ecosystem, which is one of the richest and most attractive in the national territory in terms of agricultural production and rural tourism. It hosts the biggest wetlands area in Italy, made of canals, rivers and navigable lagoons, biodiversity, historical and architectural heritage. Besides the Po Delta regional park, the area includes many Sites of Community Importance and Special Protection Areas, as well as regional and national natural reserves. In the past, these environmental assets and local specificities were not adequately valorized since the residents have the perception of living in a marginal area with a limited awareness of the potential of the wetland, of the environmental and cultural assets of the park and of some traditional local products. The economy is more oriented to agriculture, fishery and tourism which offer occasional jobs and with high rates of unemployment for young people and women. Moreover, the area has been characterized by a high decline in the population and a growing ageing population with a low level income level if compared to the rest of the regional population (Delta 2000, 2008).

For the 2007-2013 LEADER programming period, the LAG is one of 5 in the Emilia-Romagna region with a total budget of €20.3 million, including public and private sector matched funding.

The mission of the LAG is to implement a local development process based on self-determination of local communities aimed at recovering local environmental, social and cultural resources. By identifying local needs and resources, the LAG implements the necessary projects in order to support economic growth and to create new development opportunities (Gigante R. et al., 2012).

Considering the environmental vocation of the territorial area, the criticalities and potentials analyzed, the local development strategy (LDS) has been developed from the evaluation of its elements of distinctiveness such as the presence of the Po Delta Regional Park and, in general, of an ecosystem of environmental and landscape value, the richness of its historical and cultural heritage, the strong agricultural tradition and the presence of typical local quality products.

The interventions focus on the prevailing economic sectors such as agriculture and tourism, the qualification and promotion of wetlands, specialized and high-income farming, and marketing of local products focusing on the excellence of environmental, natural, cultural and productive resources with the aim of promoting the Delta area as a tourist destination.

3.1.2 Origin and composition of the partnership

Delta 2000 was founded in 1994 as a non-profit association to implement the will of some local governments and act as a reference agency for public entities, associations and private economic operators of the Province of Ferrara. Delta 2000 had the aim of informing, raising awareness and assisting the public and private operators on the development of the area. In this area, there was the opportunity to develop a special strategy for accessing European funds with priority given to intervention, and *'it was a period in which talking about a participative approach was so desperate, because it was difficult to put two mayors of neighbouring towns around a table, since each one thought only of his own territory'* (LAG Official operator no. 1).

In 1996, the LAG became a limited liability consortium by consolidating its role as a development agency, this involved the LAG taking the management of various financing programmes and managing, for the period 1996-2000, the Community Initiative LEADER II. *'The LAG was formed because in my capacity as mayor of Codigoro together with the mayor of Ostellato we were the first ones together with a regional councillor who were interested in Community funds so much that if I were to have written a book at the time, all the others would laughed behind our backs, telling us 'What are you doing?' We began to study what the tools could be, because we were the revolutionaries of our territories, we realized that they could have a function that brought together the public and private sectors, and above all they taught us to be promoters of local development, because at that time the institutions were not used to being promoters of their own development. Therefore, the fact of being promoters of their own development planning meant putting together 10-12 municipalities, Chambers of Commerce, trade associations, some enterprises that twenty years ago in this territory were all separate bodies. In this case, however, we created with this instrument a great cohesion in which everyone has started talking, planning and spending the economic resources directly on the territory directly'* (Delta 2000 Local political representative no 1).

During 2000, as the LAG assumed the management of the LEADER + programme, the area was extended to the province of Ravenna with the entry of the Province and the Chamber of Commerce of Ravenna, three municipalities, the trade associations, as well as the Consortium of the Regional Park of the Po Delta and the private operators of the provinces of Ferrara and Ravenna. Currently, the LAG partnership consists of 93 Members; out of these 93, 27 partners are from the public sector and it expresses in a balanced way the local partnership, representing the main institutional components, economic and social territory.

The reasons for the LAG initiation and the actions that have been made are bound to the Delta Park. The Delta Park is situated in an extremely urbanized area and is where the emergence of an environmental protection tool to support the population also needed incentives, for its success, the protection tool needed to appear immediately as a factor of development rather than conservation. The LAG and its ability to move not only in technical terms but also in terms of animation helped farmers understand that the park is an opportunity and not necessarily an obstacle to their productive activity. It also persuaded another part of the population that the park and therefore the LAG could be a driving force for a new phase of growth, development and integration between the so-called seaside tourism and a new, softer rural tourism which could affect large areas of the territory, in other periods of the year and not just the summer (Bolli, M., et al., 2008).

‘At the beginning there was a time in which the various subjects realized, took into account what the opportunities could be and somehow opened the debate on what the LAG was supposed to be, namely how the LAG would configure itself. In particular some association with categories more linked to the agricultural sector, started throwing signals of the kind, ‘Yes, the LAG could be a subject we control’, then, when they saw that the LAG is a representative subject of the whole territory, the attention was shifted on the theme: ‘What is our involvement?’. We have tried to apply the LEADER approach by seeking immediate direct relationship with local actors starting from companies, associations that have always been very involved in the LAG, with important roles within decision-making bodies’ (LAG Official operator no 2).

In this context, the LEADER approach has allowed territories and different economic and institutional entities to use this tool, for the exploitation of locally typical products, the focus on quality farming, and for the recovery of urban and rural villages. The LAG then found in LEADER programming the opportunity to assess the territory, to identify the aspects that could be improved and valued and to create opportunities for businesses. Consequently, from this point of view, the LEADER approach has allowed public and private actions to combine in a vision that is to grow the whole territory and to fully grasp its resources.

3.1.3 Organization, operation and involvement

The Delta 2000 LAG represents a successful implementation experience within the LEADER approach; it has stimulated participatory processes by the involving of the territorial population together with local bodies and economic operators along with the regional institutions.

The experience gained in these years and the results achieved allowed the LAG to refine the methods and tools to apply an innovative approach and methodology to a territory that involved institutions not only at the political but also technical level, as well as local economic operators, social partners and the spontaneous aggregations of young people and women. They were involved during the planning and implementation of the local development strategy and the LAG carried out a considerable animation activity by giving particular attention to the territorial aspects. The LAG’s means included the organization of meetings and workshops with local representatives, monitoring the implementation of local projects and information activities with the aim of making the territory aware of the importance of the LEADER approach.

These means are mainly geared for the sector operators, but also serve as a tool for the associations to disseminating initiatives and activities. There is a double strand of involvement through constant information via e-mail and computer, on the one hand, and direct involvement in the different activities associated with the various programs, on the other.

The participatory methodology has been realized through the setting up of several bodies that have accompanied the LAG in the definition and articulation of the integrated design and system proposals and in the selection of the projects that can be funded. The methodology also ensures a high level of involvement by the territorial subjects.

The function of these bodies is to involve a variety of stakeholders engaged daily in the planning of the territory, assisting their work with experts and local community actors in order to create real participatory working groups with the aim of integrating and correlating public and private planning (Delta 2000 Gruppo di Azione locale, 2015).

The Shareholders Assembly and the Board of Directors are the decision-making bodies of the LAG: *‘We have the Shareholders Assembly which meets at least once a year for the budget approval and when there are important things to discuss about strategies, guidelines, and the issues dictated by legislation. Then we have the Board of Directors consisting of 5 members, there are 2 publicly appointed and 3 on private nomination, out of which one representative nominated from the agriculture sector, one representative from the tourism sector and the other one from the sector of cooperatives. The Board of Directors meets on average once a month and it is informed on all activities of the LAG, such as on the approval and opening of call for tenders, the mandate to open a public notice contest, and is informed about the state of the implementation of activities’* (LAG Official operator no. 1).

The main structure is the ‘Interprovincial Coordination Committee’ (ICC) which includes the Po Delta Regional Park, the Provinces and their Chambers of Commerce. This Committee has a strategic role as it is in charge of programming and implementing the LDS. The Committee establishes the programming guidelines of the concerted actions, in connection with the programming tools present in the territory, and also has the task of sharing and validating the identified strategic problems and choices for implementation the LDS.

Participating Working Groups (PWGs) are also set up, coordinated by the LAG and formed by local technical experts appointed by the ICC. They proceed with the defining the territorial-level integrated projects and plans, which are individually identified, based on specific assessment methods. Pilot and demonstration interventions deemed to be priority areas of territorial importance are identified in conjunction with the IIC and local authorities concerned and approved by the Board of Directors.

Another structure is the Steering Committee (SC) which includes institutional representatives and officials operating in the two Provinces and in the Chambers of Commerce, in the Park and in the municipalities. The SC has a more operational functional role concerning the coordination and the integration among the local actors and also has a consultative role for the definition of the funding calls and for the promotional material.

Moreover, the Steering Committee is responsible for the appointment of local thematic working groups (e.g. food, birdwatching, equestrian-tourism, cycle-tourism), formed by members of the SC and accompanied by one or more experts in tourism planning and marketing. These groups work on generating commercial programs (which are broadly shared) responding to the real needs of the operators and trying to concentrate and optimize the public and private resources that can be activated in the territory.

The eligibility and qualitative assessment of applications is carried out by two committees: the ‘Technical and Scientific Committee’ (TSC) and the ‘Technical evaluation Committee’ (TEC). The TSC is composed of professionals in the fields of environment, tourism, handicraft and carries out the assessment of the projects which are directly implemented by the LAG. The TEC is composed of external experts that are in charge of the evaluation of the applications submitted by potential beneficiaries.

The LAG decision-making structure is equipped with a flexible technical structure organized with employees and professional technical associates who have been in a stable and continuous relationship with the company and thematic experts actively based on the company's design needs.

3.1.4 Outcomes, achievements and added value of the local partnership practice

Since its foundation, the main objective of the LAG has been to value and integrate the resources and economic activities present in the territory in an integrated and organized way, in order to trigger a local development process based on the self-representativeness of the rural communities. By identifying, designing and implementing actions aimed at the growth and support of the local economy, significant opportunities have been created for the development of the area, focusing attention and commitment not only on the resource system and on local potential, but also of the critical system of the area.

Through LEADER, the LAG identified, adopted and developed a participatory approach at all levels that enabled the development of an integrated system design and integrated in terms of territorial, sectoral, and programming dimensions.

The participatory procedure has allowed the direct involvement of public and private actors in the executive planning of initiatives. The purpose of this procedure was to maintain the bottom-up approach, initiated during the consultation phase, even during the implementation and management period of the programme itself (Bolli, M., et al., 2008).

The LAG working made the valorization and the transformation of territorial resources possible with the aim of contributing to the economic growth of the area in terms of employment and services and also to the preservation of the natural and cultural resources.

With the LAG's intervention, Delta Po Park became an eco-tourist destination for bird-watching with relevance at international level thanks to the presences of rare species of birds. This makes it particularly interesting not only for researchers and naturalists but also for those who want to discover and experience nature and its resources. The development of sustainable forms for the enjoyment of these areas represents a great opportunity not only to valorise and promote the area but also to foster the strengthening of the link between economic operators and the population to the territory.

'Starting from such an area when we started, we did not talk about environmental tourism as the Delta was just an area where there were mosquitoes and it was a little unlucky because it was very marginal, so the critical mass on which we worked was that of making the area a tourist destination, working on resources, the environment, tourism and agriculture, therefore on the qualification of typical productions' (LAG Official operator no. 1).

With the aim of contributing to the increased awareness of the region's unique avifauna, the LAG carried out some relevant interventions aimed at strengthening the bird watching activity. It also created a market by attracting experts and presenting the region as a destination for outdoor activities such as guided tours, workshops and didactic activities for schools.

'The increase of visitors' presence in the Autumn and Spring time for bird-watching represents the success of the idea and gives the opportunity to promote new kinds of eco-compatible tourism (fishing, bicycle tourism, river tourism, etc..). Young graduates have set societies, cooperatives of environmental education guides and whose laboratories are focused on 80% of birdwatching on the entire park territory. Among other things, in the valleys of Argenta, we funded the construction of huts for wildlife photography, in which professional and non-professional photographers pay €70 per day to stay there' (Bolli, M. et al., 2008, pp. 10-11).

The development of sustainable forms for the enjoyment of these areas represents a great opportunity not only to valorise and promote an area but also to foster the strengthening of the link between economic operators and the local population.

These are the main motivations that led the LAG to initiate a series of initiatives to consolidate and structure the Delta's environmental heritage, qualify, organize and create a network of the environmental, cultural and landscape resources, supporting the diversification and qualification of tourism at territorial level and the agro-food production.

'The fundamental objectives were to fully exploit the territory. We are children of a tourism conception that saw the centre of the world on the beach, on the coast, we had tour operators who until many years ago did not know that there were the valleys of Comacchio where they could go along tour paths. There was really only a vision of beach-centred tourism, and the value of LEADER was to also grow in the culture of our entrepreneurs the valorisation of those parts of the territory, of those peculiarities that were previously not valued. It was also thanks to these initiatives like organizing educational tours in the valley with the local operators, aimed at informing the operators and entrepreneurs that the richness of this territory has a much wider wealth potential than that which can be derived from the beach and the coast because we do not have a splendid sea that arouses emotion' (Partnership representative no. 1).

The main intervention concerned the strengthening and improving of the Park accessibility, as well as the creation of an integrated tourist service (overnight stays, restaurants, the selling of local products and tourist products focused on natural resources).

‘Before the birth of the LAG, nowhere or perhaps only in some parts of the area could you visit the Park. Today you can visit all the wet areas by boat or by hiking or biking from Goro-Gorino to the valleys of Comacchio and this is possible thanks to the working of the public and also private operators. There are also a dozen specialized centres that offer not just information, but are also small, featured museums, each with its own characteristics and there is a trend of + 10% visitors per year’. (Civil servant no. 1).

The LAG implemented other initiatives by integrating the funds of LEADER with other European, national and regional funds and policy instruments.

Some examples of this are the interventions funded by the ERDF and EAFRD and implemented by the two Provinces. These involved the renewal of villages and ancient buildings, small scale infrastructure, the creation of bicycle paths and natural trails and the complementary action carried out by the LAG in organizing animation and training activities for professionals in the field of eco-tourism. Moreover, the LAG carried out many projects to encourage the integration between the public and private actors with a relevant impact on the valorization of territory.

Moreover, the interprovincial character of the LAG promoted territorial integration by valorizing the natural and local resources of both provinces and strengthened the cooperation between local institutions and economic operators by raising the awareness of the territorial potential. It also fostered the competitiveness among the farms of Ferrara which were less competitive and dynamic compared to the farms in Ravenna.

‘We funded the display cases for typical products within the areas that are used for tourist accommodation. When the tourists arrive, they eat the food from the territory they have visited and there is also the benefit of the farmer who brings rice, wine and jams and the agriculture itself because then it is a direct sales flywheel. The LAG also greatly helps the municipal administration, by doing projects on bike paths, renovating old buildings such as the old theatre, the old market in Goro, the old elementary school in Mesola which has now become a part of tourist receptivity and a part of the library. I think that if there had not been the LAG, they would not have seen all the splendours of old renovated buildings, cycle routes, events, direct sales, receptivity, assistance and an approach to the world of farm life to the world of receptivity’ (LAG Partnership representative no. 1).

Beside its role as Local Action Group, Delta 2000 is also a development agency as it offers technical assistance to local institutions, associations and stakeholders in drawing up, implementing, coordinating and managing actions and projects in the framework of economic and territorial programmes. *‘The LAG has become a reference body for the territory where we can find opportunities not only suited to LEADER but also to put projects and to find technical assistance funds, for example we work with the province of Ravenna where we provide technical assistance for the management of European programmes. This helps us to make further budgets’* (LAG Official operator no. 1).

Finally, the organization of the LAG based on a wide partnership had a strong cultural impact, both in terms of the methodology used in the implementation of the projects and human capital thus becoming a new working model through the exchange of information and skills.

‘Now, after 20 years of leading programming we can say that there is a self-representation of the territory and which is at the basis of a territorial strategy now shared and consolidated. We have always had a very strong relationship with the province and the region, and the advantage was certainly to make local actors much more aware of the opportunities they had and of the things they did and of the opportunities they could develop by linking them with the others. To talk with private operators, to dialogue with institutions, to be able to let institutions communicate with private operators, the LAG becomes a sort of reference point for developing consistent and shared strategies, but consistent with what has actually been developed, of what has been the evolution of the territory’ (LAG Official operator no 2).

Therefore, the experience gained in these years and the results achieved allowed the LAG to refine the methods and tools for applying an innovative approach and methodology to the area that is of utmost importance. Here, the bottom-up approach, to be effective and to ensure a community-based design that integrates and is complementary to existing programming tools, requires constant fieldwork. This means going ‘beyond’ the negotiations and consultations by involving the institutions, not only at the political but also at the technical level, as well as the economic operators of the territory, the social partners and the spontaneous forms of aggregation of young people, women, etc.

3.2 The case of Capo S. Maria di Leuca LAG in Puglia Region

3.2.1 General Context

The area of the Capo Santa Maria di Leuca LAG is located in the south eastern region of the Puglia Salento peninsula and is surrounded by the sea on three sides. It has a land area of approximately 167,52 square miles and a population of more than 112,500 people. The territory is a flat surface with a small line of hills called Serre Salentine which is mainly rocky. The coast extends for about 30 miles and appears, particularly on the eastern side, in the form of medium-high cliffs, with numerous coves and caves, while on the western side there are wide sandy beaches. The 18 municipalities that are part of the area are mostly small but only a few miles apart and are somewhat integrated with each other. This territory sums up the whole set of orographic, soil and the human settlement of the peninsula: the various types of coastline, the reliefs of the Salentine ranges, the plains with a varying degree of cultivation and fertility, the range of various size municipalities, all located closely to one another and united by a dense network of minor roads. Equally homogeneous is the type of production, both agricultural and manufacturing.

The agricultural sector is characterized by small sized farms and low levels of production with a dominance of olives and cereals. In the area there are also crafts and small businesses in the clothes and furniture sectors which are dependent on orders, from larger companies from the centre and north of Italy. The strong dependence on third parties did not allow the local system to be present on the market with its own brands and identities, due to the fact it was linked to choices outside the area (Capo Santa Maria di Leuca Gruppo di Azione locale, 2010).

Today, the area of Capo Santa Maria di Leuca is a strong tourist destination not only because of the sea, but also for important historical, cultural and environmental resources. There are many castles and towers located along the coastline. There is a network of fortifications dating back to the period between the ninth and the eleventh centuries, built on one side as the watch towers against Turkish invasions and pirates, and on the other by the castles that defended the villages and towns. In the fifteenth century, in order to avoid a depopulation of the countryside, architecture changed and countless fortified homes arose. The 'masseria' (ancient farm) represents the characterizing element of the Salento agricultural landscape. Cultivation and farming, social relations and security have influenced the establishment and evolution of this type of farm. Despite the interest and fascination that these dwellings have, it is only in the last twenty years that their value, even from a tourist point of view, has been rediscovered. The great opportunities that agritourism could have for the preservation of the environment were underestimated as well as for the promotion of tourism and for the valorisation of ancient rural buildings. The same economic operators and the general population in general encountered a big limitation. On the one hand, young people did not have an entrepreneurial mindset and were not accustomed to creating debt, and, on the other, there was the mistrust of the owners, in general, lawyers, doctors and professionals, who argued that being a territory with many difficulties in its infrastructure profile, tourist activity took place only in the summer. (Sivini, S., 2003)

Culture and landscape, both rural and urban, represent the all-encompassing value of this territory and constitute the catalyst for defining a development policy. They should not only be viewed as historical and natural assets, but also as services for knowledge and enjoyment, as well as for protecting the well-being of the inhabitants' traditions and way of life.

For the programming period 2007-2013, the LAG is one of 25 in the Puglia region with a total of €18.5 million including public and private sector funding. The overall objective of recovering the identity of rural areas is the key to the interpretation of LDS strategy and objectives. The activities to support and implement this objective are therefore those that have the capacity to enhance the values of local identity such as handicrafts and foodstuffs that are representative of the local way of life, rural tourism in its various declinations such as recovery of an architectural heritage and a system of services for knowledge of the territory and its productions.

The interventions identified in the LDS are therefore the result of a profound analysis of the needs of the area identified by the strategy planners and with the collaboration of the partners. In summary, the analysis of the promoted initiatives shows a consistent continuation with what had already been initiated in the previous programming periods. In addition, the local identity and the set of interventions within the LDS are not seen in an abstract way but are combined with the concrete objectives of the local development process.

Origin and composition of the partnership

The LAG was constituted in 1991, in the form of Limited Liability Company. The corporate structure, despite the initial efforts directed at the involvement of the various local actors, consisted of eight members.

The establishment of partnership was mainly due to a group of people who, although not joining the LAG shareholders, have been active in the drafting of the LDS and the promotion of the initiative in the area, becoming animators of the LAG. These subjects around the trade union 'CISL – Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori' (Italian Confederation of the Workers Unions)' were linked by friendship and their engagement was mainly on this basis. Each one of them had his own skills, so there was someone who had an in-depth knowledge of the area, a sociologist, an accountant, and ultimately the main creator who played a key role not only at the time of the establishment of the LAG but also throughout the LDS implementation during the various programming periods (Sivini, s., 2003).

'The first programming period we made was during LEADER I. At that time, if you went around telling the local administrators we were going to make the LAG, they laughed. It was still a time of the Extraordinary intervention where things were measured at tens of billions of lire. The true measure of the needs of the territory was not the partnership of the LAG but the relationship with the beneficiaries because you had an audience of 60-70 to 80 economic operators with whom you could identify real needs. The institutional partnership of the LAG did little, so the first element was that of a direct relationship between the LAG and the territories, through the beneficiaries and somewhat with the local administrations and the second element was the ability to make a proper analysis of the needs that led to the identification of the objectives' (LAG Official Operator no. 1).

At first it was not clear what it meant to really create partnerships and the territory was somewhat distrustful of a new organizational form that involved the ability to work together. The promoters managed to involve a group of statutory auditors and some operators. More specifically, the then President of the Consortium of the Municipalities of Capo Santa Maria di Leuca proved to be interested in the initiative and became fully engaged to make the project successful.

'This territory is very closed to itself, in the sense that before it moves, it is expected that somebody will make the first step. So, you have to find skilled people, a little crazy, who believe in poetries like that of the LAG, because the LAG is a poetry. People who did not look to the personal interest but to the area of the land, who have not come as protagonists of this experience, have found themselves and therefore have placed the territory as the protagonist of this experience. With 50 thousand euros, you recover an ancient crypt. Who did you believe? Let's do this for people who believe that they carry these ideas forward. At that time, the president of the LAG also committed financially by signing bonds as a guarantee to receive EU funds' (LAG Official operator no. 2).

Subsequently, the experiences and competences accumulated over the years, trust in public institutions, the local population and the economic system, as well as the successes reported, pushed others to join the LAG. It was a process of trust that was slowly acquired by the LAG and which involves not only the local population but also the same administrations that, if at first they were particularly reluctant to participate in this initiative, they were now asking and inquiring about the possibilities the LAG offers to implement some interventions.

Nor should it be underestimated that the theme of rural development, was not immediately understood; indeed the widespread understanding viewed such as a focus as synonymous with backwardness, something linked exclusively to agriculture and hence to be rejected. The widespread mentality considered in negative terms all that was related to agriculture. Listening to rural talk implied, necessarily, something that had to do with farming and was therefore rejected and not considered. It was thought that development was only industrial. There was indeed a widespread culture that had tried to eradicate the agricultural tradition of the area due to the many problems that afflicted the sector to turn almost exclusively to industrial promotion. It was not easy to tell farmers what it meant to shift from agricultural land production to service farms. Earlier, the incentives of the former EEC were being made to produce more because the goal was to feed the people of Europe and so they were all directed to the greater production of food. The biggest difficulty was to make it clear to farmers themselves and therefore to the agricultural world what the completion of these other services would mean. *'That is why in those years the function of the LAG was to educate, communicate and train this new profile of the farmer, which was required by the establishment of funds for Community Agricultural Policy, and we had a great role in this going home by home, church by church, shop by shop,*

farm by farm, municipality by municipality to make it understood that the very strategic approach of agricultural-environmental development was changing, namely the famous sustainable development, which the European Economic Community had sanctioned through the regulations. It was not easy to say to a farmer, 'Look, if you add to your main agricultural activity services, hospitality, direct sales, product transformation, valorisation, environmental commitment, you can make a new territory'. So it was about giving him a new job (LAG Partnership representative no. 1). There were many formal and informal meetings with the potential beneficiaries to give extensive information on what the LEADER approach was and the objectives of the LAG's strategy which was simply summarized with 'look around, see the beauties that you have and make them emerge'.

Local operators did not believe they could get public contributions simply by submitting good projects. Usually it was considered essential to have the intervention of a friend or a politician. The time for granting and funding was very long and often the costs one had to bear for the contribution one received were considerable. Only later, when they actually got the funding grant and its disbursement, have the doubts of the local operators receded.

All this has enabled local institutions to be more aware of the problems of the area and to understand the need to play an active role in the territorial development through the implementation of joint actions. In addition, local authorities played an important role in the dissemination of the initiatives organised and in the publication of the calls launched by the LAG. At their local authority offices, there are special desks in which all information about LEADER and the individual actions activated are displayed.

The LAG had a strategy envisaging the implementation of a large number of interventions with the consequent involvement of a number of subjects. This choice stems from the fact that the local reality was characterized by the presence of small municipalities and small companies unable to invest large sums. This situation has therefore required extensive work of engagement and mobilisation of the territory. Many beneficiaries were directly contacted by the LAG animators who personally visited the potential beneficiaries, explained the LEADER spirit and tried to convince them of the opportunity offered. The trade associations in the partnership contributed to the dissemination of information and activities of the LDS and, when drafting the LDS, they provided suggestions on the actions to be taken.

Currently, the LAG partnership consists of 120 Members and it expresses in a balanced way the local partnership, representing the main institutional components, economic and social territory. More specifically, 29 partners are from the public sector (Province of Lecce, Inter-municipal consortium of Capo Santa Maria di Leuca, Land reclamation authority of 'Ugento e Li Foggi', municipalities of the area, University of Salento, Plants genetic Research Institute) and 91 partners are from the private sector (associations of the agriculture, culture, craft, trade and enterprises sectors, cooperatives working in the sector of development and promotion of the rural territory, and private operators interested in the development of the territory). There are also two banking institutions and schools with which the LAG often works for with regard to training initiatives.

Each partner participates in different ways within the LDS strategy, also depending on their role, sharing their strategy and pledging to strengthen the image and presence of the LAG in the territory.

3.2.2 Organization, operation and involvement

With regard to the LAG management organization, there is no rigid division of roles between staff, but, on the contrary, there is a wide range of people available to collaborate. The operating structure is therefore very flexible and, despite the considerable amount of work, it is quite efficient. It should be emphasized that staff works a lot of overtime without any remuneration, showing a real interest in the business.

The administrative bodies are the Shareholders' Meeting, the Board of Directors and the Management while the technical and organizational structure is composed of a Technical Committee, an Animation Structure, and an Administrative Secretariat (Capo S. Maria di Leuca Gruppo di Azione locale, 2010)

The Shareholders' Meeting has the duties of appointing members of the Board of Directors to approve the annual and multiannual financial statements.

The Board of Directors has the task of managing and implementing activities falling within the scope of the corporate subject. It is elected every three years and is chaired by the LAG president, who has legal representation in the company.

In addition to the steering bodies, the construction and implementation of a process described in the preceding paragraphs require a continuous involvement of public and private actors involved in LDS dynamics. To this end, two arenas of participation and leadership are set up in the LDS implementation process: the Technical Partnership Committee (TPC) and the Permanent Forum of Integrated Projects (PFIP).

The TPC is composed of 15 members appointed by the Board of Directors and expresses its views on the strategic guidelines for the implementation of the LDS, proposes initiatives to be funded within other Community, national or regional instruments, publishes calls for proposals, assesses the territorial promotion plan, and carries out delegated functions as directed by the Board of Directors when appropriate.

The PFIP is set up with the mission of gathering around a single table all the people in the area who have implemented the LDS. The Forum is responsible for coordinating the projects implemented under the LDS, identifying forms of functional and managerial integration between the various interventions, proposing initiatives and programs for the promotion of routes and paths within the territorial offer promoted by the LAG.

A representative for each of the LDS-funded projects is part of the Forum. The Forum uses technical assistance from the Director of the LAG and for its reinstatement activities of the LAGs themselves. Alongside the two above-mentioned participation bodies, the contribution from the different categories of members is assured. With regard to Higher Education Institutes and the University, they play an important role in orientating students who are potentially interested. Having to choose a personal path to gain access to the labour market, the students are able to come into contact with the LDS objectives and measures in order to be able to assess the possibility of creating new businesses within the LEADER approach. In addition, these institutes have an active role in the quality monitoring phases of the LDS, in order to provide adequate support in the event of technical and methodological corrections to the action taken by the LAG on the territory.

The success of this LDS is also determined by the degree of participation and involvement of the population. Public bodies are actively involved in the presentation phases to the local population; they also help develop the economic subjects of the LDS and the measures to be taken when publishing the calls for proposals and disseminating the results that will be achieved. In order to foster a widespread dissemination of the opportunities contained in the LDS and to give all potential beneficiaries the opportunity to take part in the initiatives, the LAG favours the use of informative and awareness-raising meetings (with potentially interested local actors), the distribution of information materials and posters in the municipal area, and the creation of sections of the institutional websites dedicated to the LEADER approach.

Finally, private companies and other participants in the LAG represent the most significant part of the partnership. They are the first witnesses to the local development strategy of the LAG. These private companies are asked to transfer their experience to the new beneficiary companies, including and above all through the specific actions to be put in place by the LAG during the implementation of the strategy (Ecosfera S.p.a., 2005).

3.2.3 Outcomes, achievements and added value of the local partnership practice

The LAG has set up its activity focusing on a micro-projects strategy and the involvement of a large number of public and private entities. All of this was done to increase the sense of belonging by the local population for the area and to create the perception of being the main actors in the development of the territory (Gruppo di Azione Locale del Capo di Santa Maria di Leuca, 2009).

Despite the great difficulties the LAG encountered, it has succeeded in moving forward with much determination and with the enthusiasm of public and political actors who have believed in the 'bottom-up' development that has allowed them to use underused resources and capabilities.

As the territory has a long heritage of not appropriately valuing the endogenous resources, ranging from the region's environment and history to its tradition and culture, the LAG has identified and sought to bring

these things to light with the tools described above and with the most appropriate modalities. The promotion of rural tourism has been the focal point of the LAG for which it has decided to allocate about 40% of its available resources. Bringing the consumers into this space and making them part of the production and training processes, tourism is able to become the best and most profitable form for marketing and promoting local products. For rural tourism to take off and have positive implications for the economy of the territory, it was necessary to create the optimal conditions such as better organization of services, greater capacity of the local system to respond to the market and to offer higher quality products.

In twenty-five years of activity, the LAG has been promoting and managing vocational training and upgrading courses for young agricultural entrepreneurs and young unemployed people involved in the creation of farm businesses, providing advice and technical assistance services to local authorities and private companies, informing young people about business opportunities and financing their entrepreneurial ideas, and organizing promotional events in Italy and abroad. What is important, therefore, is the intense activity of mobilization and engagement carried out in the area and efforts to allow for stable relationships between the various actors.

The LAG's strategies to ensure active rural development have been targeted not only on the involvement of the population and the training of jobseekers but also to disseminate news of the benefits that LEADER could provide from local rural development.

The activity was based on the coordination of several synergistic actions between the productive sectors, the local population, the associations, the public bodies and the activities of a small but strong territory, capable of inducing an integrated and homogeneous development of its rural areas. The ability to listen, observe local communities and be proactive, the spirit of research, and the constant attention to discovering new opportunities for intervention on the ground, all have been the winning cards that the LAG has been able to play in order to develop substantial entrepreneurial ability within the area.

Moreover, since the municipalities base their economy on agriculture, the LAG is one of the important components that characterizes the economic and social reality and it is one that more than anything else can guarantee a real and balanced development in the area.

Today, the LAG represents a reference point for the entrepreneurial system and for the public administrations of southern Salento, realizing a multifunctional centre, within which a series of services are provided for the territory, with a permanent exhibition of typical products from the area, the iconographic and multimedia repertoire of the historical-architectural and environmental heritage, the tourist information point and receptive offer of the territory.

As the LAG's area is characterized by historical and natural resources of great interest, the LDS has sought to enhance and improve the offering tourist, not only from an environmental and cultural point of view but also in terms of receptivity. An innovative initiative is that of the 'Village Hotel' created in the historic centre of the municipality of Specchia and then extended, given the positive results achieved, to two other municipalities. The experience of building the Village hotel has gained weight and recognition as the LAG spent itself with its human resources in order to implement it, outside what was the condition of the LEADER approach. The action consists in the restoration of ancient uninhabited houses, to be used as a hotel in the summer months. The management and leasing activity are carried out by the LAG. Thus, the recovery and revitalization of historic centres have been initiated.

With this project, a very innovative intervention model has been developed both in terms of the recovery of the abandoned old town, aimed at tourists and in terms of rural tourism. The ancient hamlet of Specchia was chosen, as it is one of the best examples of a preserved historical centre in Puglia and is particularly important for its historical significance with regard to the sixteenth century peasant society.

Another important intervention has been aimed at the recovery, preservation and enhancement of four forests of the Mediterranean scrub: the woods of Cardigliano and Specchia, the Park of Querce (oaks) in Castro, the oaks of the Vallonea in Tricase and the Park of the Baronale (Baronial) Palace in Tiggiano. Through these interventions, the spaces were made available, educational boards, billboards and benches were installed, and guided tours were organized. On these sites today, you can see typical species of the Mediterranean flora and some of the most unique arboreal specimens within Western Europe.

“One of the dreams we had was to retrieve the historic centres not for tourists, but for people who could become residents of this area. One day we discovered that an author had come to Specchia in low season for

a month to write a book. After two days he left because there was no internet. As we walked around the historic centre we said: 'but can you imagine if these historic centres were to be inhabited each day, as they would be beautiful, but to live here you have to bring people to live and work'. We do not have the capability to bring 1000 American tourists, so the ability to recover a cultural asset is not to recover it, inaugurate it and the following day we do not know what to do. And then if you imagine investing in historic centres you have to provide them with very high-capacity services like fast internet, because if one has to live here you have to understand what advanced innovative services they need, and those are the challenges' (LAG Official operator no. 2).

Another goal identified was the valorisation of craftsmanship through the creation of an exhibition and sale point of the products from the area. This way, the creation of a network of local operators was attempted to enhance the typical handicrafts such as the processing of olive wood and the typical stone-cutting of Lecce. Another very important aspect on which the LAG has worked was to initiate cooperative practices between the local people. Introducing the typology of agritourism on the territory for the first time, a network of information exchange between the various tour operators was also created. In addition, collaborations have been developed between farmhouses, artisans and traders of typical products. The use of typical ceramics and wood processing have become part of the agritourism furnishings, along with exhibitions of local artisan products. In the agricultural sector, small-scale production was also encouraged, by solving the old problem of the lack of transformation of local products such as olive oil, wine, preserves and the other by linking manufacturers with transformers.

All this was possible not only because some people have become a vanguard group in design, but because they have been personally engaged, and operate with a strong initiative spirit.

*'I say that it takes an element, a fundamental ingredient, passion, because we need to be local development operators, or someone says animators always, we have to play this role twenty-four hours a day, you do not have to do a Monday to Friday office job here, you also have to take part in the festivals on Saturdays and Sundays, take part in events that will allow you to know the territory better, to bring you some light that can serve to promote and enhance the territory better.'*²

Finally, the LAG has set itself the objective of becoming a self-supporting development agency, so that it can continue to operate at the end of the LEADER Programme. With the aim of providing real services to local businesses and institutions, the LAG provides technical assistance and consulting services on various financing opportunities for the development of the area (LAG Operator no. 3).

4. Conclusions

4.1 Summary of the main findings between the case studies

The two case studies analysed, even if in different local contexts show that the bottom-up initiation is considered a crucial element in the process of local development.

The implementation of rural policies at local level are indeed carried out toward an integrated bottom-up development model that embraces the broader aspect of rurality in terms of territorial concentration, integration and concertation with partnership at local level based on a horizontal cooperation between the different local government levels and socioeconomic actors.

This model does not simply mean 'from the grassroots', as opposed to the vertical and potentially undemocratic features of the 'top-down' approach; rather, here the accent seems to be placed on the necessity that the collective and horizontal process must come from within the local area, that strategic decisions must be decided and implemented in a decisive relationship with the local dimension.

The consideration of the case studies from two different regions has been very useful in showing that partnership operation raises similar issues and challenges. It was interesting to observe that the attitudes, motivations and also the frustrations and sense of resignation about the practice of local partnership were almost identical.

The LAG areas share an economic disadvantage characterized by a high unemployment rate if compared to the level of their wider regions, a declining agriculture, rural depopulation, low level of innovation and a

² Capo Santa Maria di Leuca LAG Operator no. 3, Tricase, 15 July 2014.

weak productive structure. While Delta 2000 LAG benefits from the proximity to a rich dynamic area, Capo Santa Maria di Leuca LAG, suffers from the weakness of the surrounding area.

From the experiences analyzed in the study it emerged that the LEADER partnership formalization involving negotiations of agreements and the adoption of innovative participative methods has not been an easy process. This is particularly true in those areas with different social and institutional contexts and where there is a weak tradition of dialogue, cooperation and associations, have at times hindered progress. Here, the process of local partnership building emerged as a key and iterative process with a strong influence of the local context over its practice and the identification of a number of contextual factors that shape the environment in which it is taking place. The evidence derived from the case studies indicates that the process of local partnership building relies on the mobilization of a wide range of interests, of a flexible local space, of local resources, ideas and projects as well as of existing structures, organizations and civic traditions. The empirical evidence also emphasizes that essential to local partnership building is the involvement of local actors, the formulation of a clear strategy and the setting-up of effective structures. An important role was played by the local authorities but the efforts made by key people with energy and local contacts were also crucial.

In the area of the Delta 2000 and more generally in the Emilia-Romagna region, there is a longstanding traditional presence of cooperative actions as well as an efficient public administration in promoting and supporting the partnership. At the behest of some of the local governments, Delta 2000 was founded in 1994 as a non-profit association to act as a reference agency for public entities, associations and private economic operators. In 1996, the LAG started to be involved in LEADER, enlarging its perspective from the implementation of single specific actions to an integrated plan of development of a large area. The initiative for the creation of the partnership came from the local public institutions that have always played a pre-eminent role and influenced all its developments.

In Puglia, the experience of association and cooperation was particularly scarce. By comparison, the public authorities were not crucial for the creation of Capo Santa Maria di Leuca which was formally constituted in 1991 for participating in LEADER I. The creation of partnership was instead mainly due to a group of people who have been active in the promotion of the initiative in the area. Here, the presence of the trade union 'CISL' was mainly oriented towards the defense of the workers' rights and the activity in the partnership was motivated mainly for the reason of solving their financial difficulties.

Therefore, while Delta 2000 followed a way already marked out, Capo Santa Maria di Leuca had to invent a new form of participation which relied mainly on the existing networks of the trade union.

What emerges from the data of foundation of both LAGs is that their birth was influenced by the opportunity made available by the presence of EU LEADER granting funds to form a partnership and decide to work for local development. The year of foundation which corresponds to the programme timing, the acquisition of a legal status which is the condition to be eligible to receive funds are all indicators that the partnerships are dependent on public funds. Maybe they would never have thought of getting together to work for local development without that strategic element. However, it cannot be denied that such a presence of rural development programmes was probably the strongest factor that pushed local actors to form a partnership.

It can be highlighted that in both case studies a crucial role was played by key people followed by local institutions and private sector organisations who had the capacity to put together different subjects focussing on the specific advantages on the basis of personal contacts and the pre-existence of networks, and previous experience of activities for common development objectives among the promoting actors and that the LEADER funding opportunity was determinant. This speaks to a different dimension of multi-level governance, namely the more horizontal building of relationship and the inclusion of a range of different voices to build a common vision. Two important dynamics in this mode of governing feature for both LAGS. The LEADER approach for both case studies was an emphasis of flexibility in trying to bring in new people and new ideas to seize new opportunities. Another important dynamic was the building of trust across a diverse set of peoples and places who were not used to working with each other. The case studies showed that representation is a key issue, in particular one of the main challenges is to allow sufficient representation without making partnerships too big and unmanageable. Evidence from the case studies indicates that the level of representation varies in a balanced way reflecting the key institutional and sectoral interests of the territory.

The categories of actors most represented in the two partnerships are public institutions which also include the chambers of commerce, the park authorities and public institutes of research and the private actors such as the trade associations and businesses, while there is a smaller presence of the most vulnerable sectors of the local society (women, young people, the elderly, and the disabled). The people representing the private sector are not acting as individuals but rather representatives of their organisations and are not also politically elected members of other organisations on rural development. They are organized into groups or organizations and their involvement is seen as active local players willing to commit their time. Among the interviewees there seems to be a consensus that the whole point of partnership operation is to bring together a variety of powers, expertise and roles. Therefore, instead of talking about the 'sharing of responsibility and power' we should talk about an 'association of responsibility and power' where local actors take responsibility and play an active part in rural development and this action does not imply that all partners are playing the same role. These fundamental characteristics have made possible several crucial activities for the endogenous development such as the coordination of diverse actors, the integration of interests at top-down and bottom-up levels, and the pooling of resources.

Intrinsic to local activism is the sense of civic responsibility, the sense of being committed to and getting involved in the local area. For some interviewees this commitment rested on their personal inclination to bring time, experience and support to the area in which they are called to work. For other it is a means of showing a willingness to become part of a community in which they have chosen to live and to take action.

The partnership building takes place in a context where local conceptions, values, attitudes and mentalities have to be accommodated because they reflect rooted local traditions. The research findings showed that local partnership operation requires time to mobilize partners, to conciliate and coordinate the differences, to develop communication and agreement to establish a new mode of functioning and a new culture between actors. Whilst there is a growing recognition that rural development requires a collective action, local partnership operation is the result of a long, slow and laborious process. Thus, rural development emerges as a long-term, progressive, comprehensive and pragmatic process that is organized over time. Its existence and longevity depend on the local context, a set of opportunities, on the issues to be addressed, on a broad mobilization of local actors and in particular it is a process which depends on people, their views and reasoning, expectations and vision for the development of their area.

The motivations of the various actors to join the partnership move from taking advantage of the programme funding to resolving the problems in the area. In addition, certain actors have decided to become part of the partnership by virtue of a specific interest. This is the case of Capo Santa Maria di Leuca LAG where the private subjects are clearly getting more opportunities as beneficiaries than the public authorities. The participation of the trade associations in both partnerships is instead due to the fact they see in these experiences new opportunities to benefit they represent. Therefore, there should not be any surprise if local actors mobilize themselves with the aim to take advantage of such policies as this is coherent with the desire of promoting local integrated development.

Concerning the level of involvement of the partners, there are some common elements as well as significant differences. Both partnerships being active within the LEADER approach, share the common objective of rural integrated development and consequently promoted coherent actions. The general objective was to introduce a territorial development strategy focusing on the valorization of the endogenous resources through the realization of interventions oriented towards the development of alternative agricultural activities, supporting the diffusion of local products, promoting tourism in the internal area, and funding projects in the cultural, environmental and economic fields. The strategies of interventions are oriented to professional training and creating employment in the field of rural tourism, SME, crafting and agri-food, improving the supply of services, promoting opportunities in the innovative production for generating new incomes, increasing participation from local people and the association of local authorities in the development processes, valorizing the identity of the area at the cultural and environmental level and in terms of quality of life.

Since the two LAGs are formally constituted organisations as required by the national laws for the LEADER programmes, their organizational structure is similar and it includes an assembly of members where all the partners are represented for the approval of the budget and the programme activities. The Board of Directors, which is nominated by the Assembly, is responsible for the main decisions and the president is the legal representative of the society and chairs the Board of Directors. An operational structure in charge of the

implementation and management of the activities is rather small; in both LAGs the staff is well motivated and there is a good collaborative attitude.

They are all supported by an operational structure in charge of the functions of implementation and management of the LAG activities. Abilities like planning projects and providing technical support to beneficiaries as well as listening to local people and connecting projects and institutions are of vital importance for the successful working of the LAG. In many cases, the staff felt a personal responsibility to the project by providing special support during the planning and implementation phase.

The eligibility and qualitative assessment of applications is carried out by technical committees composed of professionals in the fields of tourism, environment, and handicraft. They also express their views for the LDSs implementation, propose initiatives to be funded, publish calls for proposals and assess the territorial promotion plan.

In terms of legitimation of the partnerships, the case studies showed that it derives mostly from the direct involvement of public authorities and less from involving local people. Further legitimacy is given by the transparent decision-making process and also by the funding supervision and monitoring assured by the LAGs as a mandatory requirement from the European Commission. In addition, because the partnerships rely very much on their coordinators, their reliability and credibility are an important element of the partnership's overall legitimation.

As reported in the previous sections, partnerships, through the combination of diverse interests, can provide answers to addressing complex and multi-sectorial issues, can create the cohesion to resist the socio-economic pressures of globalization and (through an efficient staff and management structure) can also be a sort of mechanism for providing an atmosphere of mutual trust in the face of the decision-making processes at local level.

The involvement of the local people is considered an essential element in the rural development process. In this context, public meetings appear to remain an essential method to address their views, to present their projects and are also the occasion when decision are taken and projects to be implemented. The involvement of the local community activity is generally achieved through the organization of public meetings that imply a large participation even if it happens through the direct participation of the project beneficiaries.

Concerning the effects of how well the partnerships work, it can be measured in terms of the new ideas, methods and technologies as well as the discovery of the value of local resources that have been reached by the partners, the beneficiaries such as local farmers, local administrations, the population of the whole area and its visitors. This is demonstrated in more detail in the case of the Delta Po Park which became an eco-tourist destination for bird-watching with relevance at international level and the Village Hotel in the historic centre of the municipality of Specchia. These development initiatives are followed by other specific business-oriented issues such as the promotion of local products, diversification of the agricultural activities, rural tourism and the preservation of natural and cultural heritage. Competences and knowledge are shared and pooled as a basic resource supporting the action for development as a whole.

The respondents are aware of the fact that the partnership must operate free from obstacles and with a capacity of adapting its action to the reality of the local context, and by no means should it ever become a bureaucratic organization. In this process, the key people once again play a fundamental role as they are essential not only in the stage of the birth of the partnership, but also in the subsequent operational phases. Such key people have a great capacity for inventing suitable solutions and, above all, the ability to create connections with different actors throughout the territory, with the ultimate aim of establishing new stable networks. This is a further sign of an absolutely non-bureaucratic process, where individuals with direct contacts with the territory where they operate should somehow count more than the structures they belong to. An overall excess of bureaucracy slows down the activity of the LAGs which in the Italian case means essentially a lack of coordination in the circuit between the local, the regional and the national levels.

Moving the analysis to a national focus, the first thing that must be observed is the substantial lack of preparation of the Italian institutional system in the face of a bottom-up participatory development. This has created many difficulties for the concrete initiatives in the territories.

In Italy, the institutions responsible for implementing the LEADER approach are the regions. One of the more interesting findings in this comparative analysis is that the Emilia-Romagna region was not particularly stronger than the Puglia region in terms of providing support for their respective LAGs. The reality is that

the relative success found in both case study LAGs reflects the strengths of the LEADER governance approach and the ability of the local actors to make use of this approach.

This leads to the final point: local knowledge, know-how and identity, the economic potential of the area, and the commitment of the local population are considered the relevant elements of the partnership. Partnerships and therefore the LAGs are perceived in their areas as the main strategic tools to operate in the local context which role is at least as important as that of the public fund and where the resources must be the basic point of departure for a bottom-up development activity.

No successful action can be projected or implemented moving from a superficial understanding of the local characteristics, problems and needs. As a matter of fact, one of the greatest efforts carried out by the partnerships was that of putting together as much information and experiences as possible, often carrying out ad hoc studies on which the elaboration of the local action plans was based.

The LAGs have the *‘capacity to transform individual interests into more unitary projects usually based on economic development of land-based goods (food, wine, environment, landscape, local heritage, etc.). A single company or economic sector is unable to produce locally-based products ... they are also unable to aggregate firms in the task of controlling free riders’* (Granberg L., et al., 2015, pge 154). Hence the capacity to combine the political and the technical autonomy gives the LAGs an institutional prestige which is recognized by both the regional administration and the local level. Therefore, the Italian case studies confirm that the bottom-up idea introduced by the LEADER approach has offered new and even unexpected opportunities for the development of areas which are mainly characterized by an economic and social disadvantage. In this context, the partnership contributes to the resolution of a number of problems and issues that were seen to represent real obstacles to development in each area such as individualism, the inadequacy of top-down views, and the lack of an integrated vision of development. By allowing the development of a broad vision of problems and issues the partnership facilitates the definition of commonly agreed actions which are adapted to local needs and increases local capacity and interaction between actors and the development of alliances at sector and territorial level.

Moreover, the operation of the LAGs has brought an awareness of valuable local resources, increased awareness of sources of funding and generated the recognition of key people who are prepared to take an initiative if local decision-making processes are adequate for the task.

Negative factors are the short time perspective of the programming periods and the limited financial resources available for the projects. Thus, even if they are project-oriented in the sense they see their main function as the delivery of their LDS, they have the objective of becoming a real development agency, so that they can continue to operate at the end of the LEADER programming period with the aim of providing real technical assistance and consulting services to local businesses and institutions on various financing opportunities for the development of the area.

Concerning social exclusion issues, the analysis has confirmed that even if it is a common problem in all the case studies, little attention has been paid toward reaching the most vulnerable sectors of local society (women, young people, the elderly, and the disabled) both from their presence in the partnerships and the funding of projects in this field. Encouraging their involvement in the appropriate forums would help to define the objectives of the partnership more comprehensively and would be more in line with the idea of integrated and participatory development.

In terms of delivering rural development the case studies have shown that the partnership operation:

- helps in the preparation and determination of the local development strategy;
- enhances the capacity to obtain funding;
- develops an opening of the rural development responsibility to a greater range of actors and encourages local actors to become involved.

Thus, partnership operation for the development of rural area can be considered as following:

- it is an acknowledged approach by rural development actors;
- it supports and integrates existing organizational and institutional structures in rural areas;
- it acknowledges the variety in culture and competence between rural development actors;

- it allows flexibility in the involvement of actors such that the appropriate actors are mobilized for each specific issue.

But its operation may be challenged by:

- the slowness of the process in producing local rural development outcomes;
- bureaucracy, deadlines and insufficient funding within the local rural area;

Finally, in terms of building a capacity to act in partnership, the case studies have revealed that the process of local partnership operation in rural areas develops:

- local coalitions;
- a broader vision of local needs and issues;
- a collective commitment towards the development of the local area;
- a greater credibility of local action from both within the local area and also from the outside;
- greater trust among actors;
- new impetus for action in the local area.

Furthermore, through the involvement of a wide range of local interests they inject a certain dynamism to get ideas off the ground and make them happen and can be considered as a platform for the sharing of know-how and skills among the partners and endow local actors with a stronger capacity building at local level.

To conclude, the interview findings indicate that the local partnership approach has provided those initial expected benefits of wider participation, greater reciprocity between rural development actors, and an increase in local capacity for development actions. In addition, the present research has also revealed that the local partnership practice is a useful means of providing a diagnosis of local activism and a stimulus to the participation of new and supporting actors.

4.2 Empirical and theoretical contribution and implications of the findings

The success of LEADER LAGs in the implementation of their LDSs largely depends on their ability to produce an added value that extends far beyond what may be expected from the arithmetic sum of their outcomes in term of results achieved and funds that have been spent. The vast literature on this subject clearly illustrates how there has been a genuine added value in the process of local endogenous development as partnership are recognized as an effective instrument for introducing new positive orientations and self-confidence among local actors.

Even the most recent Guidelines on LEADER issued by the European Commission provides a consistent definition of this: *'The assessment of the added value of LEADER/CLLD refers to the benefits that are obtained as a result of the proper application of the LEADER method, compared to those benefits, which would have been obtained without applying this method'* (European Commission, 2017, page 16). The quality with which this approach is applied therefore determines the intensity of added value that can be produced. Moreover, the European Court of Auditors in its special report claims that *'The potential added value of the Leader approach is not solely in the results and impacts of the physical outputs (the projects implemented with the Leader grants). The community involvement achieved through the bottom-up approach can also lead to less tangible impacts, such as 'capacity-building' and 'empowering the local population'* (European Court of Auditors, 2010, page 50).

In the most dynamic rural context in which different development processes have already been initiated, the rural partnerships tend to reinforce the institutional context as they contribute to the development of local democracy. The analysis of the case studies in two different regions confirms that rural partnerships contribute to local development in different forms such as new processes diffused at local level for the reconstruction of the social fabric, the adoption of an integrated approach and the development of local democracy. They represent a new base for involving the local people and for the establishment of new form of cooperation between the public and the private actors. The shift from an agriculture-focused to a territorial rural development strategy has focused attention on a new endogenous development model which is based on the assumption that people working at the local level know better how to face the problems within their areas and the endogenous potential they have (Schucksmith, M., 2010)

Here, the rural development programme becomes more accessible and flexible at local level enhancing its profile and identity. The application of the area-based principle in the LEADER approach relies on a local partnership which includes individuals and organisations with a great knowledge of the area.

This arrangement gives significant advantage to the partnership over the local authorities working alone in the same territory. *'This advantage relates to the partnership's ability to coordinate, to foster cooperation rather than conflicts, to pool resources, to operate informally through local networks, to experiment and innovate, to attract other sources of funds'* (Moseley, M. J., 2003, page 166).

The role of the rural partnership is therefore based on the assumptions they are a key instrument for decentralized development programmes such as LEADER and that their constitution encourages the local institutions to play a more proactive role in the management of the opportunities offered by the various public policies.

In the contexts of the case studies which are characterized by a poor performance of the economic sectors and an isolation from the external processes, the role of the rural partnership appeared to be as an effective instrument for introducing new positive orientation and new forms of integration among the local actors and for supporting the valorization of local resources. The evidence is given by the implementation of innovative projects in traditional sectors, the mobilization of external funds and the professional competence for rural development.

LEADER can create new spaces for rural development to enable social groups to take part in local development initiatives at economic and social level and open up opportunities for different voices to be heard.

In terms of building a capacity to act in partnership, the operation of local partnership develops coalitions at local levels, a broader vision of local needs and issues, a collective commitment for the development of the rural area, a greater credibility from both within the local area and from the outside, a great sense of trust between actors, and an integrated strategy to be implemented. Trust means also a truthful and friendly atmosphere between local actors and administrators which enables to maintain interaction networks at informal level in the addition to the formal and administrative relationships. Here, the partnerships get the resources required to operate within their LEADER approach to implement their local development strategies and the local actors have the competence and the experience of working through a fluid policy of interactions.

Some effects of the rural partnership operation are visible at the local level in terms of direct social and economic benefits. The sectors concern the valorization and protection of the natural environment and the cultural heritage which are often not recognized as a common resource as well as different forms of economic and social support initiatives for the rural population with the aim to increase local incomes and create or maintain job opportunities by introducing new forms of economic activities to decrease the outmigration of young people and to improve the services available to the rural population for rural areas.

Therefore, it can be said that LEADER is a territorial approach *"by and for' the local population and a means to design and implement strategies and actions in rural areas from a bottom-up perspective. It also stimulates the decision-making processes in local socio-economic development which were previously controlled almost exclusively by public actors"* (Esparcia, J. et al., 2015, page 30). In this context, LAGs, through their partnerships, may play a strategic role for the success of the development strategies since through their competences they are more able to identify solutions to the various problems and needs of the rural areas. In theory, they are open to citizens allowing them to participate in contributing to the diagnosis of problems and needs and in the design of the relevant development strategy.

The LEADER approach also gives the local actors the opportunity to elaborate joint strategies for their territories and for their economic activities. It improves their capacity to negotiate common interests and it brings recognition to local partnership that are able to manage development strategies at local level. This highlights the added value of the LAGs that flows from the bottom-up and partnership approach to the local development process of the areas they serve than in the conventional way in terms of enhanced local participation and ownership of the development activities.

This method is based on two principles: *'decisions should be taken by bodies located as close as possible to the areas of intervention and the decision-making should involve all bodies on equal footing, be the fruit of*

long-standing reflection on development processes and based on the enhancement of local cultural identities' (Osti, G. 2008, page 175).

Even if the bottom-up approach is heavily emphasized in the literature, there is also an important top-down component because of the strong role of the government in funding, planning and setting the rules at national level. From a comparison between the top-down and bottom-up development theories it is clear that while in the former the subjects are institutional and the interests are exogenous, in the second the subjects are local and the interest are endogenous.

'In this sense, LEADER, with its devolution of decision-making, represents significant progress in the centralist facilitation of endogenous processes, perhaps because it enables alignment of the interests of sub-national territories and the European Commission. In terms of design and delivery at least, LEADER has a good claim to being a case of integrated rural development'. (High C. et al., 2007, page 103).

In conclusion, this research has analysed the impact that the LAG level has in terms of local development improvements in the form of leverage, democratization and decision making with a bottom-up approach. It has been shown that it would not be possible to implement local projects co-financed by the European Union and to achieve these results if the system were managed only at the national level. Rather, the LAGs and the national level such as the ministries have to be considered interdependent where the types of added value that the LEADER approach provides at the LAG level could not have been provided by the ministries (Thuesen A. A., et al., 2014).

This is also confirmed by Hooghe and Marks who state that the advantage of MLG is scale flexibility where every governance level engages in the activities that are optimally suited to its skills. Moreover, the reduced distance costs between project holders and the central level that were generated with the inclusion of the LAGs in the MLG setting can be considered as the shorter workflow that the system provides project beneficiaries. This is further supported by the working of the LAG animators and initiators within the communities which is essentially vital. The presence of sufficient numbers of these individuals make the bottom up LAG dynamic work. Therefore LAGs can be considered as new functional units that have been set up to deal with specific policy-tasks and offer new opportunities to participate in EU development policies in order to receive additional resources. In these units it is not just the public administrations that are involved but also economic and social partners and local residents. *'To neglect the inclusion of the local level, as some of the "grand theories" of European integration do, leads to the exclusion of the most important level of governance within the EU. The local level is vital for the EU for several reasons. And not just because local public administrations implement EU legislation and policies. Being the lowest functional level of the EU, it is the closest to the people and has the potential to make the EU visible to the people. It is at local level that local residents have, to some extent, access to and participate in policy-making'* (Kull, M. 2009, page 9). In this context, local partnerships tend to supplement and not duplicate the work of the local authorities with whom they should be encouraged to have a good working relationship. Their working is important in the implementation of EU policies as the bottom-up approach has allowed local level authorities some policy space to innovate and develop new partnerships across sectors and institutional boundaries.

The only limit is that EU funded policies such as LEADER remain limited in terms of time and budget. Future programmes must take into consideration that the empowerment of the partnership and the capacity-building needs a long-term process and that sustainable benefits are gradually achieved after many years. Due to this limit, very few partnerships emerge from the grassroots. Most of them are initiated often by the public sector in response to competitive funding programmes. Here, the public sector acts as a lead funder and organizer by setting the rules of the game and determining the type of partners, the working and the evaluation procedures and providing the office space and administrative support.

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