

## **2. LEADER: basic features for a territorial approach**

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the European Union was launched in 1962. It was created in consideration of the major role of agriculture in terms of affordable food and at the same time the need to sustain the survival of the sector by trying to solve farmers' problems, mainly related to economic support and agricultural productivity. Its contribution extends to issues closely interconnected with the agricultural world such as climate change and the sustainable management of natural resources and rural landscapes.

The CAP has undergone important reforms over time, strongly influenced by the evolution of the European context, moving from the sectoral and mainly productivist economic approach of the first decades to a territorial and developmental one (in particular under the European agricultural fund for rural development - EAFRD). The Treaty on the functioning of the European Union represents the legal basis of the Common agricultural policy. It regulates every aspect from direct payments to farmers through to the one most directly connected with this book, the support for rural development (see EU regulation 1305/2013).

Specifically, in the context of integrated territorial planning, one of the most innovative tools is certainly LEADER.<sup>4</sup> Introduced as part of the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy as a pilot initiative in 1991 in favour of rural areas, in consideration of the significant results obtained in all European territories, it has been progressively extended and re-

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<sup>4</sup> On the different development programmes and their evolution in particular in Southern Italy see De Rubertis, 2013, which contains an exhaustive discussion of the various development programs over time, highlighting their limits, potentialities and critical issues.

proposed in the following decades, so as to expand its scope and become an integrated and ordinary tool for the development of rural areas in the 2007-2013 programming cycle. At the same time it has become a method and tool for social innovation, especially in marginal and peripheral areas (Labianca, 2016; Labianca et al., 2016; 2020; Cejudo and Labianca, 2017).

LEADER is part of this European policy, its acronym *Liaisons entre Actions de Développement de l'Economie Rurale* seems to highlight the strong role of actors and the links between actors and actions for the development of the rural economy made stronger in the 2007-2013 programming cycle. In fact, during this cycle, rural development policy saw a major change. It focused on three main areas: the economy of agri-food production, the environment and the rural economy, and the population in rural areas. This generation of strategies included four axes: axis 1: improving the competitiveness of the agricultural sector and forestry; axis 2: improvement of the environment and rural areas; axis 3: quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy; axis 4: LEADER.

Reading the Community strategic guidelines (2006) of this programming cycle a strong common element in all the measures emerges, namely the centrality of human capital and its role for innovation in rural areas. In particular, for axes 1, 3 and 4 in fact it states:

“Under axis 1, a range of measures will target human and physical capital in the agriculture, food and forestry sectors (promoting knowledge transfer and innovation) and quality production [...]. Axis 3 helps to develop local infrastructure and human capital in rural areas to improve the conditions for growth and job creation in all sectors and the diversification of economic activities. Axis 4, based on the LEADER experience, introduces possibilities for innovative governance through locally based, bottom-up approaches to rural development”.

Therefore, the role of human capital seems to be recognized with greater force when axis 4 is called on to act transversely to achieve the priorities of axes 1 and 2 and especially of axis 3. In fact, in a horizontal

sense it should work through the "improvement of governance and for the mobilization of the endogenous development potential of rural areas" (EC, 2006).

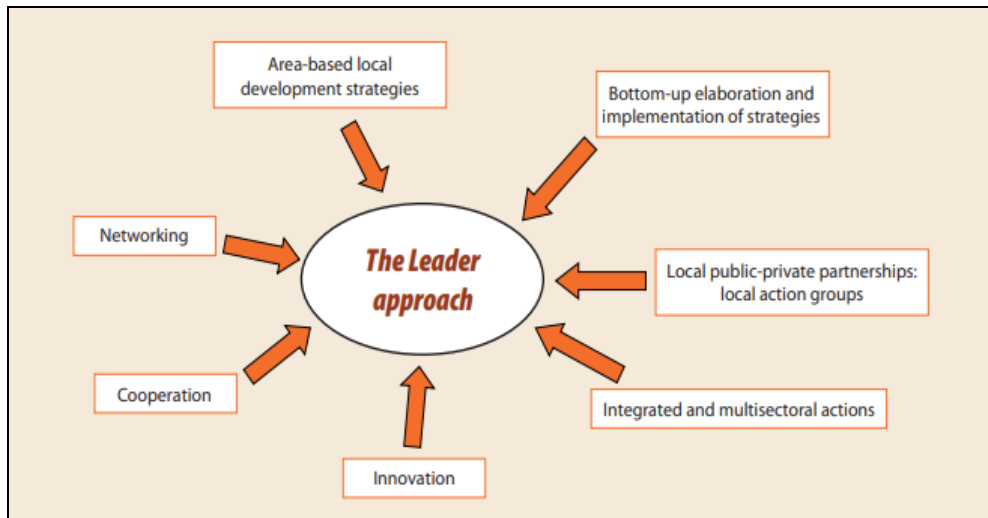
The Community guidelines indicate some key actions for achieving these priorities in even more detail. They focus on strengthening local partnerships, on animation and the acquisition of skills to mobilize local potential, the promotion of public-private partnership and the leading role of LEADER as a driving force in eliciting innovative approaches for rural development and in encouraging collaboration between the public and private sector as well as promoting cooperation and innovation (EC, 2006).

In short, the strong role of innovation heavily stressed in the 2014-2020 programming cycle (EC, 2013; 2014a; 2014b) is already clearly defined with its close connection with LEADER in the 2007-2013 programming cycle. Infact, the LEADER approach is recognized as having a leading role through the ability to trigger new approaches, to favour the comparison between ideas and new approaches, to stimulate innovation in terms of new knowledge, new products and services, and innovation in terms of governance, in particular soliciting new approaches to link agriculture, forestry and the local economy, contributing to the diversification of economic activity and strengthening the socio-economic context of the rural areas.

Underlying the LEADER approach is an awareness of the territorial diversity and the need to implement locally defined strategies. In order to better understand LEADER's basic features, the European Guide (2006) indicates and explains the seven key aspects (see Figure 2), to be considered in an integrated manner with the others, representing an important new element compared to the traditional rural policy measures.

These features go far beyond the physical and material characteristics of the context. In fact, they leverage the tangible and intangible components thus affecting methods, approach and style of strategy. Territories and actors take on an active role here and are no longer merely passive.

*Figure 2. LEADER approach: the seven key features.*



*Source: EU, 2006.*

In fact, an important change takes place in the conception of the territory, no longer considered an abstract and passive space but as Governa (2005, p. 41) argues “an active actor”, decisive in the development processes, representing a reference point on which it is possible to build, and evaluate, policies and actions. The reference to territorial specificities and local actors is explicit in the EU guide. Although the attention to local resources and specificities is clear, less emphasis is placed on local actors and it is not sufficiently pointed out that they should be at the heart of the strategy as fundamental keys for change.

The LEADER approach in fact is considered an “innovation laboratory”: it promotes collective action, drawing on “knowledge resources that link old and new, past and future, one social group with another, and endogenous with exogenous structures”; it strengthens communities by fostering people's trust, knowledge and skills and their ability to cooperate and create networks. All of this should have taken place in a renewed context, as argued by Dargan and Schucksmith (2008, pp. 278-279) through the transition from agro-centric sectoral policies to multi-sectoral approaches, from hierarchical and limited governance structures to more

flexible and dynamic structures based on broader partnerships. This, in fact, falls within the innovative nature of LEADER which does not focus on economic and short-term objectives but on "building economic, social, cultural and institutional capacities as a basis for longer-term sustainable rural development". The adoption of the bottom-up approach, encourages wider participation to bring out different visions among the actors, supports collaboration and communication, and the development of shared and integrated strategies in the territories.

According to Woods (2005) the paradigm shift from the top-down to bottom-up approach has resulted in a significant change in the management system for development, as can be seen in the types of activities designed to change and promote development initiatives. In other words, there is a contrast between centralized management (led by the state) and the bottom-up rural development led by local communities themselves. In fact communities are encouraged to evaluate the problem, identify appropriate solutions, design and implement the projects.

In this case, there is a competition for the allocation of funds, also requiring the need to mix resources from different sources. Therefore the role of the state (and of other central institutions) changes from supplier to facilitator for rural areas. Likewise, the focus and modalities of development change too. In most cases, the emphasis is no longer on attracting external investments but on improving and exploiting local endogenous resources. Therefore the focus of a project is no longer immediate economic development (or merely competitiveness) but a "community development" which aims to build the community's capacity also to regenerate its own economy. For this purpose, community development is seen as a necessary component of rural development and the actors in fact must not create social polarization within rural localities (Ibidem).

Significantly, the bottom-up approach also receives support from specific rural development professionals and neoliberal politicians seeking to restructure the state. For the former, the bottom-up approach means empowerment of local communities through development strategies in tune with local needs and the local environment. For the second group,

the bottom-up approach involves shifting development responsibilities from the state to its citizens, “in line with the broader-scale 'rolling back of the state' from areas of activity, and [so] that the state can reduce its expenditure on rural development” (Ibid., p. 14).

In order to promote, nurture and conduct these bottom-up actions there are actors, or local partnerships, known as Local Action Groups (LAGs), which represent an important original feature of this approach that leverages the diversity of rural areas. These are actors that initiate the first steps, with the task of connecting and making demands from below, interacting with those from above, then embodying so-called multilevel governance. Another significant aspect is that though the LAG has many complex tasks, it is nevertheless facilitated by an in-depth knowledge of the context, thus representing a strong point in the elaboration of the local strategy.

Infact, as expressly indicated by the EC (2006) the LAG has the task of identifying and implementing a local development strategy, managing resources with the ability to bring together and harmonize the human and financial resources available, promoting a network of local actors, collective projects and multi-sectoral actions to improve economic competitiveness, strengthening dialogue and cooperation between different rural actors, reducing the potential conflict, facilitating the processes of adaptation and change in the agricultural sector, along with the diversification of the rural economy and the quality of life of the communities living there.

Two central elements concerning stakeholders specified in the same document EC (2006) are the representativeness and balance of local interest groups. They can be set up as part of the the process or, as often happens, build on existing partnerships. The European experiences on the one hand highlight the increased maturity and the acquisition of skills of LAGs over time but also the different degrees of autonomy in establishing the local strategy, depending on national and above all regional governance styles, thereby highlighting constraints or limits (see De Rubertis, 2013; Cejudo and Labianca, 2017; Dax and Oedl-Weiser, 2016; Dax et al., 2016; Navarro et al., 2016; Cejudo and Navarro, 2020).

The bottom-up approach contains the most interesting and innovative elements. In fact, according to Dax and Oedl-Weiser (2016) it explicitly relies on social capital to build and strengthen (social) innovation in rural areas. Therefore, a new style of development planning is taking shape, establishing new methods of discussion and comparison at all levels and scales, favouring multilevel governance styles, supporting intermediation between different demands, and basing its strategies on internal knowledge of the territory and of its demands.

But, on a local scale, it is complex to implement practical ideas and tools to encourage real change as desired by the LEADER. In fact, LAGs are required to carry out important and unprecedented tasks of coordination and preparation of a local plan, all inevitably affected by the climate and the degree of innovation of the context within they operate.

On the other hand the experience accumulated over the years in the development processes promoted in rural regions is fundamental in order to understand the ways in which these small laboratories of socio-economic dynamization can work. An exercise of great value and which adds a practical reason and new operating methods (García et al., 2015).

As it is expressly indicated in a research by García et al., 2015, which analyzes the Spanish experience in the context of the Leader, the keystone is the reinterpretation of the previous one in a proactive way, focusing on the opportunities created rather than the criticalities emerged.

In the final part, the study presents a diagnostic and territorial planning methodology in which theoretical concepts are applied, the use of development tools, specifying methods, the type of leadership and the responsibilities assumed by the different socio-economic actors in the planning process.

These are operationally laborious processes because they affect the traditional way of doing things and involve introducing changes in local structures and balances of power, in the way institutions themselves are understood. In this case it is possible to speak of participatory planning, which is however a structured process in which it is necessary involving different actors to urge them to express their priorities, to propose concrete solutions.

As the authors discuss, this is a different way from the traditional one characterized by the certainty of the result. Development interventions should not be in fact seen as simple executions of externally planned activities, but as “spaces in which different socio-economic actors, institutions and individuals interact, negotiate, enter into conflict or even resist” (Ibid., p. 148).

In addition to the different phases described in great detail in the work, it is important to focus on the reasons that the authors consider to be fundamental to justify the adoption of the participatory approach in rural contexts. In particular, they can be summarised as follows:

- decide from inside - the citizens are in fact the best connoisseurs of their territory and for this reason they should be involved in all stages of the process, also by virtue of a constitutionally recognized right;
- strengthen the sense of community - joint work and planning strengthen the sense of community and belonging;
- knowledge makes processes more effective – be aware of real needs makes the solutions and interventions more effective, knowledge of internal priorities and needs makes it highly likely that government actions will adapt and respond to them;
- collaboration and benefits - collaborating between different actors is of mutual benefit, the close collaboration between citizens and technicians is of mutual interest, in fact it allows them to get to know the community they serve better, thus developing proposals that better suit their needs or strengths;
- knowledge of limitations makes more concrete - being aware of the actual limitations of public administration allows citizens to be more realistic, a more realistic vision of resources and destination of them, thanks to a direct comparison in which citizens can know the limits that administrations must face, therefore they have a more realistic vision of what can and cannot be expected from their government, and therefore understand better decisions made by authorities and / or technicians (Ibidem).



From this broader and renewed perspective, a series of recommendations emerge to be taken into consideration in participatory planning processes.

In particular, the need to establish limits because no planning process can solve all the problems existing in a territory, however it can allow the overcoming of some specific problems and the start of a change in the negative dynamics of a territory; involve key people who are genuinely interested in decisions, avoiding wasting time and resources in not very conclusive participatory processes; prefer the diversity of actors over quantity, trying to involve people of different ages, with different social and cultural profiles with different perspectives on any topic; guarantee effective communication and transparency throughout the process in order not to frustrate the efforts made; improve local capacities, as already highlighted in the study, in fact the sustainability of an area's socio-economic improvements depends on whether these are based on both capacities human resources of its inhabitants, as in the generated social capital; favor flexibility because as is known the planning processes must adapt to changing circumstances; assess activities and provide frequent updates of the different stages of the planning process, to avoid the great frustration among those who believed in change and finally build with confidence, in fact one of the biggest obstacles to participation is the lack of trust and / or low credibility of those who lead the process (Ibidem).

Furthermore, the contribution of specialists to local knowledge is important. In fact, the local experience must be accompanied by the contribution of experts on the various planning issues, this balance between local knowledge and experts allows to connect the reality of the territory with trends and opportunities offered from the outside, as well as providing new knowledge from innovations may emerge. Finally, due to the role it plays, the participation process should be assigned adequate resources and this in consideration of the influence and future impact that the planned actions should have (Ibidem).

As argued by the authors, as planning is complex, a specific methodology for the preparation of participatory development plans can be elaborated and involves three main phases. The first phase entitled

“Discovery Open and analyse”, focuses on updating the knowledge available on the reality of the people living in the territory, institutions and resources. This is the stage of diagnosis that precedes any phase, but in this case it emphasizes the critical review of the development actions undertaken previously, as well as exposing the problems and opportunities of the region.

The second phase “Imagine and Build Confidence”, it is about tracing the challenges of the territory starting from the information and analysis carried out with the participation of local actors.

The last phase called “Designing and Innovating” specifies the activities, resources, responsibilities and controls that make up the territorial development plan.

With these premises it is inevitable that the sectoral and rational approach would come to be considered inadequate, leaving space for renewed strategies that look at the territory in a different way and opening the path for neo-endogenous ones.