

Representativeness and civic participation in rural development programmes

The case of the PRODER programme in Galicia, Spain

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Abstract: *PRODER is a Spanish rural development programme based on the European Union's LEADER programme approach and financed by EU funds. In this paper, the authors analyse the level of involvement of the social participants and assess how such programmes can contribute to the development of new local dynamics and capabilities. The results highlight the difficulties in gaining effective involvement from people. Even in areas where significant social networks exist, the lack of a culture of participation among social and governmental organizations has hindered programme development and success. Recommendations to improve the LEADER approach are provided.*

Keywords: *rural development; local action groups; social participation; Spain; LEADER; PRODER*

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There are some negative perspectives regarding the farming policies implemented by the 'classic' Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) (Lowe *et al*, 1993; Ramos Real and Delgado Serrano, 2002; Walford, 2003). Combined with the belief that decentralization of public policies fosters better governance since it allows participation and enhances the transparency of processes (Jessop, 1997), there has been a gradual transition away from an exclusively sectoral policy using a 'top-down' focus towards a new perspective. This viewpoint is based on a future in which rural areas are not perceived as the result of the evolution of just one sector, but on a future in which economic diversification is much more important and the involvement of the local population is essential. In order to achieve the economic renewal of rural areas in this way, it is necessary to diversify production and to reactivate society to make local populations participate to a greater

degree. In this context, much research has analysed the role of social networks and structures in economic performance (Granovetter, 2005). In Europe, substantial changes are in evidence, with 'top-down' sectoral strategies giving way to territorially focused action, aiming to diversify production through 'bottom-up' planning (Arnalte Alegre, 2002; Esparcia, 2000; Ray, 2000).

However, for such bottom-up, locally focused rural development programmes to be viable, and to have a sustainable impact over time, it is important to build a local capability based on the improvement of social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993). After two decades of experience with such programmes in the EU, the best results have been achieved in those areas that had a relatively significant degree of social capital at the outset. Conversely, in areas where social structures were weaker and where a bottom-up focus had been implemented,

whilst the outcome has generally been encouraging, it has proved more effective to implement development programmes that are compatible with both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches (Marsden, 1998). To reverse the demographic and economic decline in rural areas, certain public action from the top is a necessary prerequisite for the success of 'bottom-up' programmes.

However, analysing the degree of participation by public administrations and social players in these programmes and assessing their social impact and contribution to building capability represent a complex and difficult task. Given the variety of objective and subjective elements, it is difficult to define key performance indicators in this field. In fact, in much of the published research that analyses the impact of such initiatives, social development is seen as a means to, or a condition of economic development (Shortall, 2004). This explains the small number of studies – mostly case studies – that have analysed in depth the composition (representativeness) and dynamics of decision-making processes within local action groups (LAGs). However, this issue is important for two reasons. First, large amounts of public funds are involved, so we might think that decisions will meet the needs of the territory if the LAG operates in a more representative and participatory way. Second, this is the way to make such entities more visible for people and generate social dynamics that go beyond the simple funding of certain projects (Sorensen and Torfing, 2005).

The LEADER approach

Two decades have passed since the implementation of LEADER I (1991–93), which should be sufficient time to reach a certain level of partnership, participation and capacity building, thus generating dynamics that go beyond the simple management of support funds. But various studies have described problems relating to the representativeness of LAGs, including the lack of democracy and/or insufficient participation of players in decision-making processes, for example in Ireland (Storey, 1999) in relation to LEADER I, or by Scott (2002 and 2004) for LEADER II (1994–1999). Shucksmith (2000) completed a comparative analysis of the UK and Spain, and research by Esparcia (2000) for the second phase of LEADER or by Garrido and Moyano (2002) for LEADER II and PRODER I programmes in Andalusia is also particularly relevant.

An inadequate level of representativeness and participation was reported in official assessments of LEADER's first two phases, published by the European Commission (Dethier, 1999; Todtling-Schonhofer, 2003). This led to changes in the third phase – the LEADER+ initiative – implemented between 2000 and 2006 in relation to LAG formation, aiming to increase the degree of representativeness of people and local private players. The Commission Notice to Member States (14 April 2000) laid down guidelines for the Community initiative for rural development (LEADER+):

'Local action groups must consist of a balanced and representative selection of partners drawn from the different socioeconomic sectors in the territory concerned. At the decision-making level the economic

and social partners and associations must make up at least 50% of the local partnership.' (European Commission, 2000)

Such deficiencies have excluded a significant proportion of the population from any LEADER process. In some cases, the absence of what Ray (1999) calls 'deliberative democracy' is explained by a sharp demographic reduction and lack of social dynamism in rural areas where such initiatives have been implemented (Pérez-Fra and López-Iglesias, 2005). But in other areas, the shaping and operation of LAGs have constituted the obstacle preventing participation. In certain regions, a poorly structured and cohesive society with low levels of cooperation between local public entities, together with the lack of a participative experience, has created the perception of LAGs being an instrument of local government – which in practice is how many have actually worked (Pérez-Fra, 2003).

Research aim and methodology

The research had two main objectives:

- (1) to assess whether the composition of LAGs integrates or represents the interests of a given territory's society; and
- (2) to analyse the mechanisms used to generate participative dynamics by the various entities that make up an LAG, and how those mechanisms operate during programme implementation.

Our analysis goes beyond a formal perspective, from the adjustment of groups' composition and the operation of its bodies, to the relevant legal framework. We have tried to clarify the extent to which decision-making processes are the result of a democratic operation and of certain criteria of openness and participation.

Study area

The research was focused on Galicia, Spain – a region where rural areas dominate in terms of land use, demographics and economy. It is an area where there is a wealth of experience of rural development programmes (Rodríguez-Couso *et al*, 2006). Between 2000 and 2006, these types of programmes were implemented across the whole Galician territory under three different schemes: LEADER+, PRODER II and AGADER. These were public programmes that operated in a very similar way, the only difference being the programming and source of funds. In the current period (2007–13), this action has been repeated, with the focus extended to all the rural areas through the Axis LEADER programme included in the 'Galician Programme for Rural Development'.

Among the 40 LAGs that were operating between 2000 and 2006, we selected 11 groups that had implemented a PRODER II programme (see Figure 1). These areas are located in the western part of the region, which is the most dynamic in terms of demographic and economic development (López-Iglesias and Pérez-Fra, 2004; Consellería do Medio Rural, 2007). Due to their social dynamism, they were in a good position to achieve participative implementation of the local strategy with higher levels of involvement by private players. However, it must be stated that most of them lacked any previous

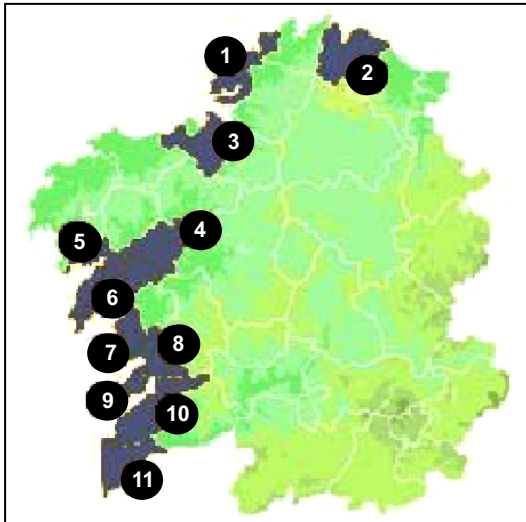


Figure 1. Territorial distribution of Galician PRODER II groups. Key: 1 – Costa Ártabra; 2 – Mariña Occidental; 3 – Terra das Mariñas; 4 – Sar-Ulla; 5 – Muros-Noia; 6 – Deloá; 7 – Salnés; 8 – Pontevedra; 9 – Morrazo; 10 – Mancomunidade de Vigo; 11 – Baixo Miño.

experience in the implementation of such programmes. Only two of eleven groups (Mancomunidade de Vigo and Baixo Miño) were operating in 1994–99. In the case of Baixo Miño, a LEADER I initiative had already been implemented in 1991–93 (Pérez Fra, 2003). The total government subsidies for this programme in Galicia amounted to €61.9 million.

Research approach

The initial stage involved a compilation and analysis of secondary data sources, including population and housing census data, agricultural census data and information relating to other economic variables gathered from the Council's databank, the Instituto Galego de Estatística. This helped to develop an overall assessment of each area and an initial set of participants for interview. Official data relating to each LAG were then gathered both from the regional managing authority, AGADER (*Axencia Galega de Desenvolvemento Rural*) and from the groups themselves. It was necessary to combine these data with qualitative information to understand the wider context of the existing social dynamics in each area as well as to understand in detail how each LAG operated. For each LAG, interviews based on a common questionnaire were

held with management, the chairman and a member of the board belonging to the private sector. Group interviews were held by adopting a common approach. Although the composition and number of key informants varied between LAGs (see Table 1), five profiles or types were defined: (1) mayors and politicians, (2) partners, (3) recipients of subsidies, (4) city council employment consultants, and (5) relevant entities in the area which did not belong to any LAG. Business associations, farmers' unions and members of associations were included.

Data were gathered from 247 key informants, equating to approximately 14 to 35 informants for each LAG. Group interviews were held in 2007 with the aim of establishing the real level of integration or representativeness in the LAG of each area's socioeconomic players, the suitability of LAGs' decisions to the priorities formulated by the various players, and to analyse the decision-making process.

LAG typology

Taking two variables as a starting point, representativeness in the group's composition and the degree of real participation of its members during the programme's execution, the following typologies were defined:

- *LAG ideal model* which matches with the philosophy of LEADER. All social sectors of the territory are included. In addition, partners show a high degree of participation in developing the programme.
- *Nominative LAGs*. These are LAGs in which there seems to be a high degree of representativeness in their composition, but this is not translated into significant participation by the players. Such LAGs tend to include a high number of partners representing a wide range of socioeconomic conditions, but whose participation in reality is merely formal. Day-to-day management decisions are taken by a small group that controls the executive body.
- *Non-representative LAGs*. These LAGs demonstrate shortcomings in their representation of certain socioeconomic sectors or relevant actors in the territory. However, despite this deficiency, they do show a high degree of participation on the part of both public and private players.
- *Bureaucratic LAGs*. These LAGs are characterized by a low degree of representativeness as well as poor participation of the players who make up the group in relation to operation and decision making.

Table 1. Number and type of informants interviewed for each LAG.

Type of informant	LAGs											Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Type 1	5	4	6	4	4	5	0	5	3	7	4	47
Type 2	9	3	5	4	10	3	4	3	4	6	4	55
Type 3	2	6	10	4	9	11	4	8	4	4	17	79
Type 4	2	5	6	2	2	3	5	2	2	4	3	36
Type 5	0	4	3	0	3	0	5	0	6	2	7	30
Total	18	22	30	14	28	22	18	18	19	23	35	247

Note: See text for definitions of the types of informants.

Of these four types, the last three are markedly different from the LEADER model, as they show either low penetration of the LAG into the area's socioeconomic network or a low level of participation in decision making, or a mix of both. At the same time, the existence of 'non-representative' and 'bureaucratic' groups might be indicative of a failure of the managing authority to comply with its monitoring tasks. The managing authority should be able to detect and correct any lack of representativeness by supervising official information about the LAG's composition and its local action plan.

The information for the 11 PRODER II groups in Galicia between 2000 and 2006 showed that there was a strong presence of elements that define the nominative model. Thus, even though such groups in different degrees feature characteristics of several of the established types, eight of the eleven LAGs were typical of the 'nominative model'. The remaining LAGs featured characteristics that made them more typical of the 'bureaucratic' model, with low participatory dynamics and significant representativeness deficits, or the 'non-representative' model.

Representativeness and civic participation in decision making

In order to examine in greater depth two aspects that are especially important – LAG representativeness and civic participation – it is important to consider (i) the initial set-up process and the layout of the development strategy (in 2001) and (ii) the period for programme implementation and the LAG operational period, once the managing authority has been established. These issues are briefly outlined below.

Process set-up and programme candidacy

The analysis of documents prior to programme set-up allowed us to conclude that most groups had made an effort to diffuse information and encourage members to submit candidatures. They used contacts and called for specific working groups or even larger meetings. The fact that in only three of the groups was there poor representation of the socioeconomic network when it came to the time to create a PRODER II programme was due to such efforts. However, activities aimed at promoting incorporation were considered merely as a formal requirement for the programme, instead of being a part of a development strategy for the territory. This is reflected in the lack of a methodology that would lead to effective involvement following programme implementation. The same is true in relation to the development strategy for the territory. This was usually conceived as a legal requirement, a necessary document for gaining access to public funding. It was written by a technical team, which very often had no connection with the LAG, and local players had few opportunities to participate in its drafting. The fact that in most groups the majority of members joined once the strategy had been drafted is significant. This phenomenon has also been observed in other European territories (Scott, 2004).

Table 2. Calls for meetings of corporate bodies (2002–06).

	Assembly	Board of trustees	Board/executive committee
LAG 1	5		30
LAG 2	3		5
LAG 3	8		28
LAG 4	2		16
LAG 5	4		19
LAG 6	5		27
LAG 7		N/A	5
LAG 8	5		20
LAG 9		10	
LAG 10	9		32
LAG 11		16	

Programme implementation

During the implementation period, most LAGs had formal bodies that made participation possible. However, the level of involvement was weak, with only four LAGs calling general assemblies or board meetings on a regular basis throughout their period of operation (Table 2). Two of those groups corresponded to LAGs which had previous experience in managing these kinds of programmes. For the remaining groups, either they did not hold regular meetings or it was impossible to gather evidence of meetings taking place.

The analysis of meeting minutes also shows some consistency of content in all groups. The participation and involvement of social and governmental organizations are limited to the sanctioning and management of the programme's organization. Of course, sometimes there were debates and discussions about how to define development strategies, but such discussions, in general, were subject to the programme's daily running. As a result, we observed that the attendance of private members at meetings of the assembly/board of trustees decreased gradually. Based on data gathered, in only three LAGs was the number of private partners higher than 50% of the people attending assemblies/boards of trustees. In contrast, the meeting attendance of various bodies of public representatives (local governments) tended to be high throughout the period, most likely due to their role in decision making. For most groups, the lack of documents to certify that meetings of sectoral round tables had actually been held was very apparent. In fact, only two LAGs (Salnés and Pontevedra) had any evidence to demonstrate that such entities did operate. This could be an indication that the participation process had been initially formalized, but then had never taken place in practice.

The operation of corporate bodies with management functions should be analysed separately. All LAGs seemed to be more stable regarding their operation, and members tended to attend meetings more regularly. The limited participation of private players in taking decisions explains why, in most cases, the LAG's initial social bases were not involved after the constitution of the LAG. In only four groups did the number of partners increase during the period of programme implementation. Even in those cases, this was not accompanied by an increase in people attending the meetings of corporate bodies. In

part, this was because none of the groups had set up any communication plan specifically focused on recruiting new partners. Neither was an 'open-door' principle widely implemented. This issue has been noted in other EU areas – for example, the Netherlands, as reported by Aagaard (2009). It is also important to note the low involvement by farmers and their organizations in LAGs. To explain this, we include evidence from Galicia's PRODER II – contrary to what happened in other Spanish Autonomous Communities, agricultural and forest projects could not benefit from any subsidy. The exclusion of farming as an industry recipient of funds has been one of the main reasons why these players showed little interest in participating actively in LAGs.

The representatives of local government (mayors) have been the players who have held most influential power in LAGs. Only in one group was the chairman from the private sector. In five LAGs, the number of public players involved in decision making was the maximum legal limit. The analysis of minutes showed that the players who participated more actively in both general assemblies and meetings of executive bodies were the representatives of local administrations. This is supported by Edwards *et al* (2001) in their UK study. In the endogenous development initiatives, the players who gain the greatest advantage are those who are better established and have a stronger influence on the territory (Shucksmith, 2000). In Galicia, the rural population has traditionally shown little desire to become involved in local governance.

The issues addressed in the minutes of the various social bodies are quite consistent: approval of aid, amendment of management procedures, adoption of budgets. Therefore, the participation and involvement of society in such bodies is limited to monitoring programme execution. The work of LAG technical teams was focused on these tasks. It should also be noted that there was a widespread consensus in all technical teams regarding the levels of bureaucratic administration needed to be completed by very small management teams.

In summary, the strategy of LAGs can be defined as being essentially passive. LAGs are conceived as a mechanism to distribute public subsidies, and this attitude in practice leads to a lack of strategic planning. The work of the group is limited to the day-to-day running of the programme, and does not extend to more global actions for the territory. We define this as a 'subsidizing' perception of the programme – an issue that has been highlighted in previous studies of Galicia (Pérez-Fra and López-Iglesias, 2005).

Conclusions

This analysis demonstrates how difficult it is to achieve the effective involvement of people in programmes that use the LEADER approach, even in areas where there is a relevant social base. Therefore, the implementation of such programmes in regions such as Galicia presents significant challenges – first because many rural areas have an extremely weak social fabric, and second because there is no culture of coordinated participation between social and governmental organizations.

In order to achieve better implementation of the LEADER approach, it is necessary to strengthen the

democratic operation of LAGs. This entails improving the involvement of local people in the decision-making processes. The implementation scheme of these programmes needs to be modified:

- A close monitoring of groups by the regional managing authority is of paramount importance. Such a supervisory task is especially significant during the creation and selection of groups. In Galicia, we detected the existence of groups whose characteristics aligned them with the 'bureaucratic' rather than the 'representative' model. The public body responsible for PRODER II took for granted the existence of certain necessary conditions of representativeness and social integration. Obviously, the reality was different.
- The regional managing authority must play a more active role in monitoring and follow-up tasks once the LAGs are operating, and must carry out those tasks more rigorously. The lack of a strategic programme to activate various participatory bodies prevented most groups from setting up and maintaining constant social involvement.
- Finally, the exclusion of the primary sector as a recipient of funds has important consequences for the participation of farmers and farmers' organizations in LAGs. In areas where the level of farming activities is high, LAGs need to pay special attention to this sector and its workers.

It is important to note that these recommendations do not impact on the LEADER 'bottom-up' philosophy. On the contrary, they are designed to achieve better horizontal and territorial coordination to include both top-down and bottom-up approaches, assuring an adequate use of public funds. We must bear in mind that LAGs are private entities whose operation is not under the control of the state. What we are proposing is, on the one hand, to free the groups from the burden of bureaucratic tasks, which should be the responsibility of governmental institutions. On the other hand, we suggest that a clearer action and operational framework is needed for LAGs, and that greater supervision will guarantee better representation of diverse social and economic interests. All this needs to be achieved while maintaining a high degree of flexibility, so that specific local needs can be properly reflected.

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