

Citizen participation in neo-endogenous rural development.

The case of LEADER programme

Romina Zago

*Ph.D. student in Political Science
CDO - Center for Sustainable Development,
Department of Political Science, University of Ghent
Ghent, Belgium
romina.zago@ugent.be*

Thomas Block

*CDO - Center for Sustainable Development,
Department of Political Science, University of Ghent
Ghent, Belgium
thomas.block@ugent.be*

Joost Dessein

*ILVO - Institute for Agricultural and Fisheries Research
Ghent, Belgium
joost.dessein@ilvo.vlaanderen.be*

Gianluca Brunori

*Department of Agricultural, Food and Agro-environmental Science
University of Pisa
Pisa, Italy
gianluca.brunori@unipi.it*



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Abstract: The next European programming period 2014-2020 is aiming to reach the goals of Europe2020 strategy of sustainable, smart and inclusive growth, looking also at a concrete overrun of the economic and social crisis broken out in 2008 at global level. Together with these objectives and according to the spirit of European integration, the European Union wants to stimulate a more intense and purposeful participation of citizens in decision-making processes that is one of the main European challenges towards 2020. Through the European program 2014-2020, the citizen involvement in the decision-making processes is being realized by the Community-led Local Development (CLLD) whereby the reading key is the LEADER method.

The main goal of this research is to verify how citizen participation influences local development strategies and how local needs are best incorporated into the decision-making process. Therefore, this paper is focusing on how citizen participation is involved in the achievement of the neo-endogenous local development. We aim to develop a suited theoretical and analytical framework for and a better understanding of citizen participation in neo-endogenous local development, by analyzing the LEADER program, considering its philosophy and its application.

Empirically, the first case-study of the research is the Local Action Group (LAG) FAR Maremma, in Tuscany, whereby LEADER is carried out, and that was the only one in that Region to apply a participative method for the elaboration of the local development strategy during the European programming period 2007-2013.

Keywords: participation, endogenous rural development, LEADER, place-based approach

1. Introduction

1.1. Europe towards 2020

The next European programming period 2014-2020 is aiming to reach the goals of Europe2020 strategy of sustainable, smart and inclusive growth. Together with these objectives and according to the spirit of European integration, the European Union wants to stimulate a more intense and purposeful participation of citizens in decision-making processes.

If we turn the glance at the speech of José Barroso on the preparations of the European Council of June 2013 – the importance meeting finalized to reach a compromise about the Regulation on Common Agriculture Policy – we could easily understand whether the main preoccupation at European level was still the overcoming of the crisis towards the direction of the growth, the sustainability and the cohesion that are the concepts expressed on the Europe2020 strategy set out in 2010 through the sustainable, inclusive and smart growth towards 2020. Smart growth refers to develop an economy based on knowledge and innovation; the sustainable growth involves the promoting a more

resource efficient, greener and more competitive economy. Finally the inclusive growth, focuses on fostering a high-employment economy delivering social and territorial cohesion.

Going ahead with this policy-oriented approach in October 2011 the European Commission adopted a draft legislation package for the future EU Cohesion Policy in the period 2014-2020, together with the Common Agricultural Policy and the Fisheries policies, which are not part of Cohesion Policy but strongly linked to it. The new legislative package, that have been approved and so officially adopted in December 2013, aims at responding to absorption and effectiveness issues implied by the financial crisis since 2008 and to foster the important role of EU Cohesion Policy in delivering the Europe 2020 Strategy.

The character of the new package can be described by stronger co-ordination between Cohesion Policy – represented by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF) and the Cohesion Fund (CF) – and the European Agriculture Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Maritimes and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) through a Common Provisions Regulation (CPR). The common spirit of the regulations are a concentration on the Europe2020's Strategy, more emphasis on incentive in rewarding performance, some more preference on integrated programming through multi-fund interventions, focusing on results through better monitoring tools and progress towards agreed objectives, strengthening citizen participation, reinforcing territorial cohesion and simplifying delivery through different kinds of simplified cost options and eligibility.

However, the most interesting goal of the next programming period, in order to reach properly the goals of Europe2020, is the greater involvement of citizen participation that is not a new issue for the European policies: still in 2001 the White Paper of the European Commission defined five principles to pursue it, that means openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness, and coherence with the big idea of expanding democratic participation. Hereby was born the idea of an EU polity based on participation and consultation by civil society that is able to ensure better governance, improving legitimacy and citizen's involvement (Liebert, 2009).

According to the next programming period's regulations, the empowerment of citizen participation will be realized through the implementation of an innovative tool that is called Community-led Local Development (CLLD), based on the experience of LEADER Program, an initiative financed since 1991 by EU Structural Funds and designed to help rural actors considering the long-term potential of their local region.

1.2 Community-led Local Development among the Europe 2020

CLLD is formulated in the CPR's regulation¹ as a specific tool to use at sub-regional level, which is complementary to other development support at local level. As a truly

¹ The main principles for CLLD are laid down in Article 28-31 of Reg. 1303/2013 and there are complementary fund-specific rules for EAFRD (LEADER) and EMFF in the respective proposals for regulations

bottom-up approach, one of its main advantages is that it is able to mobilize local resources for the development process better than top-down approaches. The bottom-up approach should not be regarded as competing with or opposed to top-down approaches from national and/or regional authorities, but instead as a tool combining and interacting with them, in order to achieve better overall results.

CLLD can mobilize and involve local communities and organisations to contribute to achieve the Europe2020 Strategy's goals of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, fostering territorial cohesion and reaching specific policy objectives.

Always laid down in the Common Guidance² that is the official document for the realisation of CLLD, pointing out to the main advantages of the bottom-up approach for the territory they said:

- Local actors have a better knowledge of local challenges that need to be addressed and the resource and opportunities available;
- Therefore they are able to mobilise resources for the development process in a way that does not happen with top-down approaches;
- This gives local actors a greater sense of ownership and commitment to the projects, which allows them to make the best of the local assets;
- However, the community-led approach can only be effective if it develops trust among stakeholders and is supported by enduring local structures with the necessary experience and expertise.

Said what above, the real nature and the deep sense of CLLD, the cornerstone of this important feature of the next European programming period is the LEADER method, the specific program for Rural Development Fund. LEADER is the heart of CLLD and it's deeply evident if we consider the interconnection between the place-based development and citizen participation which are the essential elements of the CLLD itself.

LEADER ('Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale', meaning 'Links between the rural economy and development actions') is a local development method which allows local actors to develop an area by using its endogenous development potential. Europe has launched LEADER since 1991 and since its first launch, LEADER has provided rural communities in the EU with the tools to play an active role in shaping their own future.

Then, considering the aims of Europe 2020 strategy within the next programming period, we are in front of a challenge that is twofold and it could be embedded into the spirit and the achievement itself of CLLD. On the one hand, there is the challenge of citizen involvement: participatory democracy tends to advocate more involved forms of citizen participation than traditional representative democracy and strives to create opportunities for all members of a population to make meaningful contributions to decision-making. On the other hand, the territorial cohesion (one of the pillars of the Common Strategic Framework that will lead all the Structural Funds) will be ensured focusing on place-based approaches as a method to elaborate the more efficient local

²European Commission, *Common Guidance of the European Commission's Directorates-General Agri, Empl, Mare and Region on Community-led Local Development in European Structural and Investment Funds*, 2013.

development strategies starting up from the local needs.

Therefore, the main goal of this paper is to verify the level of citizen participation in LEADER as place-based approach and its impact on elaboration of local development strategies for the LAG FAR Maremma for the Italian case, during the European programming period 2007-2013.

For this reason, the research is circumscribed by a scientific perspective, with a particular attention to two specific concepts and its relationship: LEADER as neo-endogenous local development and citizen participation.

1.3. LEADER and neo-endogenous local development

The relationship between participation and development might be analyzed by the place-based approach that aims at improving the endogenous development. In this sense, LEADER becomes a model whereby the role of citizen participation is requested to improve the endogenous development.

For the first time Ray (1999) connected the concepts of endogenous development and the role of citizens speaking about the era of reflexive modernity: the aim of territorial identity construction is to devise strategies and put in place structures that enable the locality to mediate more effectively exogenous forces that, historically and contemporaneously, have undermined the socio-economic well-being of the locality. And in fact, accordingly, the emphasis within European rural development has shifted since the early 1990s to a ‘new rural development paradigm’ focused on ‘neo-endogenous development’ (Ray, 2006; van der Ploeg et al., 2000; Woods, 2011).

In this way, as highlighted by Ray (1999), throughout the European Union, policy-makers at the state and supra-state levels are increasingly incorporating the terms ‘bottom-up,’ ‘participative’ and ‘local’ in order to signal new styles of intervention in their search for answers to the problems of rural society. Central to both approaches to endogenous development is the ‘bottom-up’ as a different approach respect from ‘top-down’ strong of the idea that development will be more successful and sustainable if it starts from a base of local resources and involves popular participation in the design and implementation of development action.

The most emblematic case of endogenous rural development that is steering to the community-based approach is therefore the LEADER method. Europe has launched LEADER since 1991 and since its first launch, LEADER has provided rural communities in the EU with the tools to play an active role in shaping their own future. The LEADER approach is based on three interrelated elements – sometimes referred to as “the holy trinity of local development” (Ray, 2000): the strategy, the area and the partnership that are developed through the Local Action Groups (LAGs). The specific features of the LEADER model come from applying 7 principles:

1. Area based local development strategies for sub regional territories;
2. Local private-public partnerships (LAGs);
3. Bottom-up approach with decision making power to LAGs;
4. Multi-sectoral (integrated) design and implementation of strategy;

5. Innovation;
6. Cooperation;
7. Networking of local partnerships.

The bottom-up approach means that local actors participate in decision-making about the strategy and in the selection of the priorities to be pursued in their local area. The involvement of local actors includes the population at large, economic and social interest groups and representative public and private institutions. Participation should not be limited to the initial phase but should extend throughout the implementation process, contributing to the strategy, the accomplishment of the selected projects and in stocktaking and learning for the future.

Still regarding the relationship between endogenous and exogenous factors influencing the local development strategies, Nemes' work is grounded in an extension of the academic and policy discourse on endogenous development (Bassand *et al.* 1986; van der Ploeg *et al.* 2000), where the term 'endogenous' refers to a process that arises from within. The notion of endogenous development has been promoted in contrast to more a modernist idea of development: exogenous development, which is driven from without. While endogenous and exogenous development can be considered as a simple dualism, Nemes and others have pointed out the challenge is to find a synthesis (Lowe *et al.* 1995; Ray 2000a; Nemes 2004); a hybrid view that goes beyond both endogenous and exogenous views of development and keeps in sight the dynamic interplay between such processes. Ray's (2000a) synthesis is what he calls neo-endogenous development, 'endogenous-based development in which extra-local factors are recognised and regarded as essential but which retains a belief in the potential of local areas to shape their future'. Nemes analyses the synthesis in terms of integrated rural development, by which he means a situation where the exogenous and endogenous institutions of rural development operate so as to reinforce one another, rather than in opposition (Nemes 2005; Nemes *et al.* 2006).

For this reason the paper is addressing to verify how LEADER might be understood as a concrete tool of citizen participation in the system of neo-endogenous rural development. In this sense we would like to define the role and the influence of the citizen participation to the elaboration of local development strategies.

1.4. Citizen participation and its definition

Dealing with the ideals of citizen participation rather than the instruments of participation, Habermas (1999) states whether democratic participation generated a new level of legally mediated solidarity via the status of citizenship (Habermas, 1999) and consequently participative democracy is considered a dynamic and open-ended project based on a "game" of active confrontation between civil society and institutions (Allegretti 2010).

Even according to Moro (2009) the participatory democracy has more to do with the phase of policy formation including the agenda, the planning and the decision. Indeed, encompassing within its scope the phases of implementation and control runs the risk of

an overlap with a phenomenon, in many respects different from the participatory democracy, which is what civic activism. On the other hand, placing participatory practices almost exclusively in the early stages of policy-making you can run the risk of further reducing them to mere consultation exercises, which, however, may not have any influence on the decisions taken by public entities. Essential point of each participatory practice that, in its essence, is regarded as such relates to the influence of participation in the political and administrative decisions. The concepts that are used in this connection are those of "effective influence" (Allegretti, 2009) and "ability to influence" (Bobbio, 2007) .

Regarding the next level of participation, that one including the deliberation and so the deliberative democracy if we would like to adopt the above distinction, Steiner (2012) resumes the definition given by Mansbridge (2010) about the essence of deliberative model: "we conclude by pointing out that 'deliberation' is not just any talk. In the ideal, democratic deliberation eschew coercive power in the process of coming to decision. Its central task is mutual justification. Ideally, participants in deliberation are engaged, with mutual respect, as free and equal citizens in a search for fair terms of cooperation". Still Mansbridge (2010) states "the deliberation should, ideally, be open to all those affected by decision. The participants should have equal opportunity to influence the process, have equal resources, and be protected by basic rights". This definition is getting closer to the Latin "deliberare" that means to weigh, to ponder, to consider, to reflect. Going ahead with Mansbridge (2012), a deliberative system is a system that involves a talk-based approach to political conflict and problem-solving skills through various forms of communication: arguing, talking, demonstrating, expressing and persuading.

Taking into account the role of citizen participation addressing the policy-decision making processes by the European perspective, it's quite evident the importance of the conditions of participants and the power they can play.

As we saw before, Allegretti (2009) elaborates the concept of "effective influence" so that the citizens, in the form of direct or representative participation, are not only involved as simple consultation exercise but their contribution can really influence the political and administrative decisions. In this sense the participation to the policy-making process becomes a tool by which the citizen is seen no longer as a mere appendix of the decision-making processes, that are generally discussed and launched at political-institutional level, but instead he plays a role that varies depending on the method used (Allegretti, 2008).

In relation to the role and the power that local actors can exercise by participating in decision-making, concerning the relationship between participation and equality Patenam (1970) refers to "equal participation in decision-making and political equality refers to the equal power to determine the outcome of the decision-making process, then the equality of power that actors engaged in decision-making".

Strengthening this approach, Habermas (2005), therefore, states whether is necessary to ensure an ideal condition for the dialectic from which they can develop the best argument leading to the decision:

1. should not be excluded anyone who is able to make a contribution to the discussion;

2. participants have an equal voice;
3. are free to speak without any pressure;
4. There is no coercion in the process and procedures of the speech;

1.5 Participation and its role on the local development

As regards the link between participation and effective local development (which is then the hypothesis for the justification of a larger active involvement of local actors), for Stiglitz (2002) development becomes a participatory process. In this sense, consensus-building, dialogue and the promotion of an active civil society are the key ingredients for sustainable development in the long term, with an opposite view to the current linkage of democracy to growth. This means the centrality of an open, transparent and participatory in a context of sustainable development helps us to define policies - understood as strategies and processes - which most likely are more able to lead to sustainable economic growth and to strengthen processes themselves.

Moreover for Stiglitz (2002) development is a process of transformation that starts from the traditional modes of production and thought to become, in fact, in languages and modern approaches. It is therefore essential society's contribution to the definition of development strategies. This contribution can only take place through the participation, as a participation of the individual and civil society (It is called as "comprehensive development paradigm").

Stiglitz (2002) uses the term participation in a broader sense: for him the participation includes transparency, openness, and the ability to give voice to both public and private reality. The term "participatory process" refers not only to those processes by which decisions are made in national governments, but also to the processes used at local and provincial level, in the workplace, and in the markets. In this sense, participation is not a mere synonym to vote, but must involve open dialogue and civic engagement widely active and requires that individuals have a voice in decisions that affect them.

The reference level which Stiglitz thinks seems to be in fact a local level, the homogeneous territorial dimension that sounds as endogenous local development.

2. Objectives and research questions

Based on the literature about LEADER and citizen participation, we realized whether, although participation is one of the main features of the LEADER method, the connection between the role of participation and the elaboration of the local development strategies is not such rooted and corroborated. And mainly we think it's missing the potential of LEADER as tool of citizen participation. For this reason the research is aiming to verify the level of participation in LEADER program and its impact in the elaboration of the local development strategies for the European programming period 2007-2013.

In order to do it, we have operationalised the objective into the following research questions:

RQ1: *How is the discourse about the citizen participation and its empowerment developed in order to boost the local development through the community-based approach?*

RQ2: *How is the citizen participation involved in the achievement of the neo-endogenous development?*

RQ3: *How is LEADER method understood as a tool of citizen participation in the system of neo-endogenous development?*

3. Method and analytical framework

3.1. Analytical framework

Given the key-concepts used that come from the theoretical framework, primarily the “effective influence” that deeply implies the concept of power, we considered appropriate looking at the Policy Arrangement Approach (PAA) that can be analysed on the basis of four dimensions: policy coalitions, rules of the game, policy discourses, and resources (Van Tatenhove et al., 2000). Arts and Van Tatenhove (2005) carry on with this formulation highlighting how the policy arrangement approach puts emphasis on: (1) the institutional embeddedness of multi-actor policy processes; (2) the manifestation of structural developments, such as globalisation, in concrete policy practices; (3) the role of different faces of power in policy-making; and (4) the importance of both substance and organisation, as well as of change and continuity in policy practices.

The PAA is interesting for our research because it lets us articulate the analysis focusing on the main characters of the LAG in order to elaborate the local development strategies: the actors, the rules, the power and the discourse. For this reason if we would like to answer to the research questions it becomes essential focusing on these four dimensions, their relationship and their impact on the participation.

For the elaboration on the discourse about the citizen participation and its potential connection becomes interesting the argumentative discourse analysis elaborated by Hajer (1993; 2003) because it suggests to find more communicative power focusing on the way in which the social interaction evolves via the exchange of linguistic and symbolic utterances (Hajer 2005). Hajer has developed several conceptual tools that facilitate empirical research: discourse, story line, emblem, discourse-coalition, discourse-structuration, discourse-institutionalization, and discursive affinity. This conceptual distinction is designed to overcome the static divisions between individuals and institutions, and then figure out how the interrelationships are constantly produced, reproduced, and transformed changes.

A specific attention will be paid therefore to the relationship between LAGs and Managing Authorities, not only inside the LAG’s members: that because assessing the role of governments in shaping civic engagement has become even more important now that governments, for a variety of reasons, are actively seeking to involve citizens in the process of policy-making (Putnam 2000).

3.2. Qualitative research

The methodology used for the research is a qualitative research that is aiming at evaluate how the citizen participation is involved in the achievement of the neo-endogenous development. Citizen participation and its involvement in local development strategies is working within a social contexts where the influence and the power of the discourse and the actors are essential. By using a qualitative researcher methodology, we are able to collect richer information and get more detailed picture of issues, cases or events (Arora and Stoner, 2009).

Empirically, the research is based on a specific case study that is a Local Action Group, the society that deal with the LEADER program and its achievement. Our case-study is the LAG F.A.R. Maremma, in Tuscan Region, chosen concerning the participative method adopted for the elaboration of the local development strategy 2007-2013: it was the only one that in Tuscany officially adopted a participative method in order to elaborate the local development strategy.

The research is developed through two levels: the theoretical knowledge about the scientific and political context I would like to focus on, and the fieldwork based on documents - formal and informal -, reports of meetings, data, projects, interviews collected among the LAGs' activity during the European programming period 2007-2013. Taking Stake's classification sources of evidence in case study (1995), considering the period we are going to analysis is referred to the past, we took into account policy documents, archival records, interviews. In detail we focused on the documents elaborated on the Rural Development Program 2007-2013, at European, National and Regional level in order to contextualize the policies of the LAG FAR Maremma. I'm referring to the European Regulations, the National Rural Development Program, the Regional Rural Development Program and its modifications during the programming period and then the five Annual Reports of the LAG, the correspondence of the LAG, the reports of the Assembly and board meetings. To a more complete overview we decided also to have a look to the final period of the LEADER Plus program in order to evaluate potential changes in the socio-economic context as well as the policies of the LAG that addressed the board to adopt a participative method.

For the interviews we used semi-structured questions finalized to reconstruct the participative method and to highlight mainly the role of the actors and the power they played. For the elaboration of the questionnaire, we took into account the structure of the Policy Arrangement Approach in order to highlight the role of actors, rules, power and discourse. Initially we started with interviews addressed to people that live the LAG as members of the board or assembly and that participated to the participative method. Then, proceeding with the interviews and collecting the firsts considerations about the method, the participation and its role for the local development strategy, we realized the importance to extend the horizon to other perspectives, specifically the representatives of provincial and regional level just for their direct influence for the elaboration of the local development strategy. Such, we realized 15 interviews so divided: 5 representative of the public sector into the LAG, 5 representative of the private sector into the LAG and 5 representative of the institutional level composed by the provincial (2) and the regional system (3). Nobody of the regional level participated to the forums - they considered it a

way to get freedom of choice to the LAG - while just one of the provincial level participated to it.

The table below shows this division.

Table 1. Semi-structured interviews

	First phase	Second phase
Public sector	3	2
Private sector	3	2
Institutional sector	0	5

Source: own elaboration

To proceed with the analysis of the data we used the NVivo software in order to code the answers based on the issues of the research questions. To analyze the participative method and the relationship between LEADER and participation, we focused on the following issues of participation:

- the level of freedom and equality (Patenam and Habermas)
- the effective influence (Allegretti)
- local/extra-local factors (Ray and Nemes)

3.3 Case study: LAG FAR Maremma

F.A.R. Maremma - Factory Environment Rural Maremma - is a consortium with limited liability that was founded in 2002 from the fusion between LAG Quality Consortium Maremma and the LAG Amiata SCRL.

The LAG FAR Maremma is situated in the southern area of Tuscan Region and it has got a LEADER eligible territory of 3.974,78 kmq being the most huge of the Tuscany coinciding approximately with the boundaries themselves of the Province of Grosseto. It's got a total number of inhabitants of 109.050. It includes 26 Municipalities³ and 3 Mountain Communities⁴ that are Amiata Grossetano, Colline Metallifere and Colline del Fiora.

³ All the municipalities of the Province of Grosseto selected by the LEADER method join the LAG

⁴ According to the Regional Law n°38 of 2007 the Mountain Communities have become Unions of Municipalities

Figure 1. The LAG F.A.R. Maremma



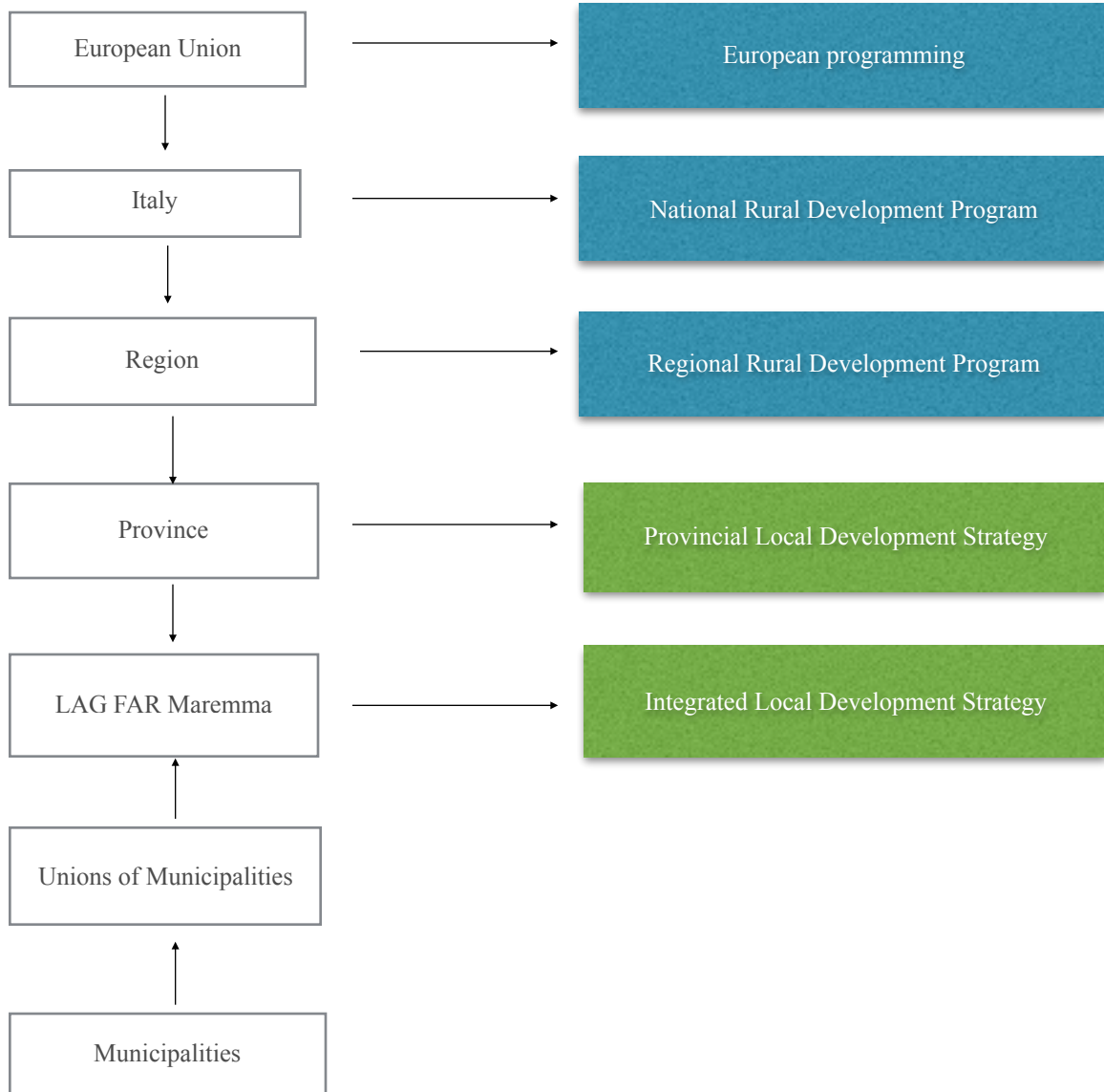
As typical of LEADER program, every LAG has got a mixed private-public partnership: in the case of LAG FAR Maremma during the period 2007-2013 the LAG's Assembly of the members was composed of 32 public bodies and 35 private bodies for a total of 67 members. Since 2007 the LAG Board has been composed by 12 members, 9 from the private sector and 3 from the public sector. It's interesting to highlight that the public sector is represented by the Mountain Communities, that's a strategic choice given that each Community can give voice to several Municipalities of its area.

Anyway, before going to analyze the specific case-study, it's necessary open a window on the Italian institutional system in order to better frame the political context whereby LEADER operates.

According to the Italian Constitution and the achievement of the Rural Development Program, the agriculture is mainly managed through a cooperation between Central Government and the Regions. About the Rural Development Program, Italy as a Member State elaborated a National Rural Development Program, that was a general framework according to the aims and the setting of the European level, then each Region⁵ was called to define a proper Rural Development Program able to reach the European objectives, following an overall setting but then differentiating according to the regional specificities. Consequently in Italy you have 21 Regional Rural Development Programs.

⁵ It corresponds to the NUT2 at European level

Figure 2. The scheme of the Rural Development System in Italy



Source: own elaboration

The European Agriculture and Rural Development Fund (EAFRD)'s Regulation n. 1698/2005 foresaw 4 Axis for the achievement of rural development and agricultural policies corresponding to specific priorities to be carried out through 28 measures (or also specific actions):

Axis 1: Improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector

Axis 2: Improving the environment and the countryside

Axis 3: The quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy

Axis 4: LEADER

According to the Italian system, each Region had to approve a Regional Rural Development Program that then would be achieved together with the Local Development Strategies of Province and LAGs. In the case of LAGs, after the approval by the Tuscan Region based on the proposal of the Province, condition for a LAG to be active for the period 2007-2013. So the candidate LAGs had to elaborate an Integrated Local Development Strategy, called SISL, that has to be approved by the Managing Authority.⁶ In this way in 2008 the Tuscan Region recognized 7 LAGs.

Tuscan Region established each SISL had to respect the following elements:

- The territorial development strategy is aimed at rural areas well-defined at sub-regional level;
- The public-private partnership of the LAG must have local character;
- bottom-up approach according to which the LAG receives the decisional power for the elaboration of the strategy and consequently the responsibility for its achievement;
- the strategy must get a multi-sectorial character based on the interaction between stakeholders and projects concerning several sectors of the local economy;
- it has to be foreseen and ensured the network together with other local partnerships.

For the drafting of the SISL, the LAGs had firmly to follow the Executive Decree no. 1812/2008 of 24th April 2008 that expressly defined the rules. While the Regional Decree recognised and highlighted overall the nature and the spirit of the LEADER method, first of all the bottom-up approach for the decisional policy-making processes, through the Annex 3, it introduced a top-down set, caged the measures to be active in four thematisms.

Tab. 2 Thematism for the RDP in Tuscany

Thematism
A. Support for the protection, enhancement and upgrading of the rural heritage of the territory (cultural, natural and small towns)
B. Support and promote the competitiveness of quality local products including through the use of new knowledge and new technologies
C. Diversification of the rural economy
D. Improving the quality of life in rural areas

Source: own elaboration

⁶ All the eligible territories that joined the LAGs were recognised by the Region with the Regional Decree n° 216 of the 25th March 2008

In this way, each LAG had to choose the main thematism to which address at least 51% of financial resources and then a minimum of 3 measures until a maximum of 10 measures into the SISL.

As we will see, this top-down interaction is particularly felt by the interviewees.

3.3.1. The organisation of the participative forums

Aside from the setting of the SISL, the most interesting thing to the purposes of the research is the point 9 of the above mentioned Decree 1812 that stresses the concentrative process:

“Given the nature itself of LEADER method as bottom-up approach, for the elaboration of the SISL participative procedures must be activated. It’s appropriate whether these procedures (which have to involve institutional actors, the social partners and the environmental associations of the territory) have got a brief description in terms of meetings and documents.”

If it’s true the LAG F.A.R. Maremma’s staff began to work on the elaboration of the SISL for what concerned the general asset of it, especially about the analysis of the area - by territorial and socio-economic situation - and the analysis of local needs, it’s equally true that the LAG was immediately interested on the activation of procedures ensuring the involvement of the local actors. The willingness of the LAG to promote a participatory process for the definition of the SISL derived, of course, from the European invitation, fortified also at regional level, in order to move towards this greater legitimacy of LEADER, but mostly it is the result of a push by the technical structure, primarily the Manager and the Chairman who strongly believe in the prospects of the LEADER method. In order to better respond to local needs and with a view to involve the partnership and not to achieve this goal, as greater legitimacy of the strategies, the LAG proposed to organize the animation forums to collect suggestion and position about the thematisms.

After the approval of activating the participative process by the Board, the LAG’s staff started to work on the organization of the Animation forums process that was called *Programme of territorial participative animation “Tools and methodologies of local development. The liaisons and the networks”*. Following the suggestions expressed during the last board’s meeting about the information and the tool to boost participation, they decided to locate 6 meetings among the entire territory to give people a better opportunity to attend. Given that the LAG area is particularly huge, they decided to spread the meetings in different places well reachable: the office of the LAG, the offices of the three Mountain Communities in order to cover the internal territory, the office of Isola del Giglio for the coastal area and at the end the office of the Province. The forums took place during the second half of June 2008 and there was a conclusive meeting showing the results of the participative method.

The local actors were informed about the participative meetings by an invitation mail with attached the brochure and the schedule of meetings. Then the initiative was published on the LAG's website. The LAG invited also the private and the public bodies

to give maximum advertise to their members, citizens and people that could be interested about the participative process well knowing the difficulty to reach them.

At the beginning of each meeting, the staff gathered the participants all together explaining the unfolding of the meeting and then giving further informations and details about the Rural Development Program for the period 2007-2013, the measures to be activated and the regional process indicated for the elaboration of the SISL. The first phase was mostly an informative moment with the aim of providing the greatest number of tools to the participants. Afterwards, the participants were divided into 4 groups - according to the four thematisms - each of which under the guidance of a facilitator chosen within the staff. Every participant joint freely the group according to the own interest, or the intervention sector. In the composition of the groups it's been decided to respect more or less the balance between public and private in order to not favor one priority or the other one based on the nature of the measures.

In each group, first of all, the facilitator illustrated specifically the RDP and answered to the eventual questions, even through materials explaining the measures of the thematisms, highlighting who were the beneficiaries, the actions, the percentage of financing, the eligible expenses and so on.

The word is then passed to each participant invited by the facilitator to discuss and to write down in a note the strong points and the weak points of the measures subdivided into the four thematisms. The notes were attached on a blackboard in order to highlight those points and then they could define the priorities as well as recognised by the local actors. Then it was arranged the crossed discussed among the thematisms.

Each meeting was registered in order to produce pictures and videos for demonstration purposes.

Totally, the participants to the animation forums (apart from the meeting of the Province where the conclusions we illustrated) were 99 of which 50 from the public sector and 49 from the private one. Three people were free citizens.

3.3.2 The choice of the main thematism

After the last animation meeting, the LAG staff collected all the notes, with the strong points and the weak ones, and comparing them produced a classification of measures and thematisms. They registered an equal merit between two measures joining two different thematisms: the measure 321a "Basic services for the economy and rural population" corresponding to the thematism D and the measure 124 "Cooperation for development of new products, processes and technologies in the agriculture and food, and in the forestry" corresponding to the thematism B, the first one open just to public beneficiaries while the second one was mainly for the private bodies. The final choice fell on the measure 321a and the connected thematism "Improving the quality of life in rural areas" for a matter of project potential given that the LAG had already received several manifestations of interest. So, in front of a former fair in the ranking, which in fact reflects the will of a majority support for the private initiative as emerged at the end of the LEADER Plus

programming⁷, the LAG's board preferred to encounter potential projects considering a major possibility of realization, also viewing the European spending bond. The final choice, therefore, came up from the effective influence both of the participative method both of the potential project realization that can be understood as a feature of resource.

Looking at the number of requests and projects achieved in the period 2009-2013, we might say the LAG was right.

4. Analysis and results

The reconstruction of the participative method, carried out by the analysis of the documents and the interviews, show the importance and the effective of the participative methodology, both in the principles of the participation both in the organization of it.

It would be confirmed the hypothesis of positive approach to the participation and the involvement of citizens, in direct and representative way, to the decision-making processes.

Applying the PAA the actors to be consider for the definition of the local development strategy are not just the public-private partnership inside the LAG, but also the institutional actors operating at higher levels, the province and the region: this is not only because the SISL of the LAG must be approved by them but also because the systematic approach of the Rural Development Program implies the involvement of the same. Anyway we can sense closer positions between the local and the provincial vision about the LEADER method, recognizing the importance of a more effective response to be given to local needs. The region seems to answer to more procedural logics that mean increased compliance with the objectives, particularly financial, imposed by European programming.

The potential coalition of local levels can also be seen at the level of policy discourses on participation and on its impact for local development. There is a substantial widespread approach both at local level, for the public and for private bodies, both higher institutional levels. We might speak about discourse-instituzionalisation on the idea to see participation as a method for the analysis of local needs and for greater sharing of territorial development policies. However it's true whether such push towards a greater participation, targeted primarily at stakeholders, is particularly felt by local actors who daily live the territory: during the interviews they repeatedly expressed the need to improve participation as a tool for developing strategies in order to answer better to local needs.

The involvement of citizenship and local stakeholders through the participative animation, as experienced for the first time as a tool of bottom-up approach in order to define the local development strategies, was recognised by the participants as a way not only to be involved in the policy-decision process (especially if you consider the impact of the seven years programming period) but also to discuss and deepen the issues. Through the methodology of "participated animation" LAG told in the Report to the

⁷ For a deepening, see the LAG FAR Maremma Final Report on LEADER Plus

Managing Authority that it has not operated as a mere carrier of information to potential stakeholders but as a promoter of a new method of information, shared and disseminated.

A discourse coalition at local and provincial level is about the LEADER method as potential tool of endogenous development of the area. However, what is highlighted is the need for a greater participation, that would be free and equal as expressed by Habermas and Mansbridge, given that the current level of participation is understood as not enough. In this sense we can find a new coalition between provincial and regional level - maybe due to the upper institutional position - for the method to improve participation: while the local level, especially the private sector, asks for greater and direct participation stimulating and improving the animation activities that are proper of LAG, the provincial and regional levels suggest to do it through trade associations that could interpretate the voice of arising number of people. Interesting is the proposal of a network using a slavish work at each level in the LAG in order to reach the largest number of common interests and actors, also looking at the third sector for a greater integration. Going up to the regional level, the role of representation is more remarked: intermediaries bodies are interlocutors of citizens, depending on their area of interest, and so they must be able to steal the interests then becoming collective interests holders once made synthesis.

The rules of the game are mainly represented by the regulations that let the achievement of the rural development program, at European, national, regional and local level. Indeed, it emerges by the idea to highlight the strong points and the weak points of the rural development program during the animation forums. For the research it was interesting in order to evaluate in depth the rules and consequently the resources used to choose. In fact the most interesting thing was the fact that some measures and actions were estimated by the local actors as not important for the local development and then the setting itself of the measures (as for instance the beneficiaries of the financing). The classification of the measures and the answers of the interviews well express the influence of the extra-local factors (the normative setting that means “rules”) rather than the local factors: one was the difficult socio-economic context in which the request for social policies was felt more and more insistently also at the light of the financial crisis that soon would have been touching the area; on the other hand, the top-down system of the Rural Development Program, at European and National level, but mainly the rigid structure of the Regional Program actually limited too much the choice of strategies that instead could better adhere to local needs, concerning both thematisms both the procedures. Different is the position about it on the regional level according to which the rules are set at European level and they just apply it in order to reach the goals.

So, it's evident a continuous tension between local and extra-local factors that can be translated into the dialectic top-down and bottom-up. This is the core even for the definition of the resources and the effective influence on the elaboration of the local development strategy. If it's true that there is a perception of equal and free participation to the decision making process, it's also true the final choice has been determined by a system of factors: the results of the animation forums whereby the participants played an effective influence for the classification of the thematisms and so of the SISL, but also for the reflection and the decision of the LAG in front of equal merit between two different

measures. In that case the final choice fell on after an evaluation that consider the local factors, first of all the socio-economic local context and the consequent request of policy actions, and several extra-local factors, the general objectives of the rural development program at European level, the procedural setting of the regional system and especially its potential impact to the private initiative.

4. Discussion

The analysis of the results stimulates the research to focus on two aspects: the level of participation realized by the LAG and the achievement of bottom-up approach. We have to highlight that LAG F.A.R. Maremma is the only LAG in Tuscany to have promoted and experienced a participative method to elaborate the local development strategy, showing also a connection between the participation and the local development. The main problem is linked to the limited level of participation especially for what about the private sector. If on the one hand the European level would like to boost the participation of the private stakeholders, even through the participation to the board of the LAG, on the other hand it exists difficulty to develop the opportunities of the participation and the possibility to influence the local development strategies. This is not true just for the initial phase but for all the programming period through the activity that for LAG is called animation. If it's stated the participation has felt like free and equal, without any expressed displacement between public and private, it's as much stressed the need to improve the level of participation, both as number of participants both as effective influence.

The same reasoning applies to the relationship between top-down and bottom-up with the perception of an unfinished realization of the bottom-up due to the centralizing tendency of the region, justified by the region as a tool to control the proper use of European funds. We can't say the bottom-up method is entirely irrelevant, despite this regional approach, but we can perceive a suffering for a complete view of the local needs.

The incomplete bottom-up approach and the limit of participation are understood as vicious circle: more decisions are taken elsewhere and more the will of participation fails because of the perception of irrilevance to the policy-making process. A question that naturally arises is how effectively local actors are aware of the opportunities of participation and how they can use also the current bottom-up as a means of exerting real influence. By the interviews we can catch the invitation to stimulate a cultural approach able to promote participation as aware contribution for the local development. And the tool called to do it is the LEADER method because it's recognized the bond with the land and the potential of endogenous development to be strengthened by a greater animation which also leads to a greater involvement of citizens.

5. Conclusions

We can register a positive approach towards the participation and its involvement in order to define the local development of the territory. Citizen participation is seen as a

tool to be improved to better answer to the local needs and to be involved in the decision-making process.

The greater involvement of citizen participation is not just an imposition of the European level but an approach deeply felt by the actors. But all the levels involved in the research - local, provincial, regional - recognized the current participation is not enough in order to improve a proper participatory development. It's requested greater participation, in free and equal perspective, in order to play an effective influence for the development policies. In this sense it would be accomplished the concept of participatory development. Especially at local and provincial level the LEADER method and so the bottom-up approach are seen as tool to improve local development through the greater involvement of citizens in order to better define the local needs and to find the opportune answers of growth. LEADER would be understood, therefore, as tool of participation and endogenous development. This is true theoretically, considering the features and the spirit of LEADER approach itself. But, it is claimed the need for a renewal of the LEADER method which has to go towards the direction of a closer union between increasing participation of local actors and a real bottom-up approach. This means a greater involvement of stakeholders and citizens that have to be more informed, through a continuous and capillary animation done by the LAG, in order to get people more influencing. This could be a way to improve the level of participation, both as number both as empowerment of citizens. One of the point to focus on is indeed how participation might be improved in the decision-making process.

At the same time, it's necessary to clarify the relationship between top-down and bottom-up, also though the balance between local and extra-local factors. A reading key to overtake the dialectical relationship between endogenous and exogenous factors might be a more active negotiation between local and regional level, ensuring more power of influence and decision of the local actors but considering that even a minimum setting is done by top-down system. As we stressed above, at local level it seems that the regional system causes a deficit of achievement of LEADER method while the regions tends to justify such setting to the European impositions. It becomes interesting for future research to verify which hypothesis might be confirmed.

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