

8. Depopulation and aging in rural areas in the European Union: practices starting from the LEADER approach

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1. Introduction

In the early 1990 studies began to speak of the *rural renaissance* or the *rural revival*, and many authors extended this phenomenon to EU rural territories, without taking into account the huge differences that separate them (Molinero, 2017). Currently, rural experts and authors are aware of this and are focusing on the disparities and diversities of rural territories that we can find throughout the European Union, demanding specific actions for deep rural areas.

Rural areas represent one of the major challenges in the development policies in the 2014-2020 programming cycle. Although there are important differences between member States, according to Eurostat (2017) it is possible to trace similar trends, in particular the communities living in rural areas are more exposed to poverty and social exclusion, moreover this risk is higher in the rural areas of eastern and southern Europe. This situation is aggravated by other conditions that cause material and immaterial isolation of these areas. These range from the absence or difficulty of access to basic services (such as health care), to the lack of infrastructure, of education and training, especially for young people through to economic weakness (EUROSTAT, 2017).

As argued, in Europe there is a recognition of the profound diversity of the territories, especially rural ones, and at the same time specific areas of intervention are envisaged in favor of the depressed ones as confirmed by the European Union (2013) under the general Regulation:

“Member States and regions increasingly face challenges that relate to the impact of globalisation, environmental and energy concerns, population ageing and demographic shifts, technological transformation and innovation demands, and social inequality. Due to the complex and interrelated nature of such challenges, the solutions supported by the ESI Funds should be of an integrated nature, multi-sectoral and multi-dimensional. In this context, and in order to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the policies, it should be possible for the ESI Funds to be combined into integrated packages which are tailor-made to fit the specific territorial needs” (art. 18).

Based on this, recently, there has also been a strong reassessment of the key role of these territories from an institutional point of view due to the enormous potential they possess, primarily the territorial capital¹ (examples of the strategies adopted are the research report by the Espon Observatory “Edora - European Development Opportunities in Rural Areas”, 2013 and the Ministero dello Sviluppo Economico, 2014 about the Italian national strategy for inner areas).

An important point of reflection is however offered by the Edora Report (Espon, 2013), where on the basis of scientific evidence, the problems that afflict the rural areas of Europe are tackled. In particular, the key social process in changing contemporary rural areas is migration. In fact, it is divided into three important phenomena: "the rural exodus" which selectively reduces and impoverishes human capital from the most marginal areas in favor of urban and accessible rural ones; the flow of economic migrants from the poorest regions of the new member States to the rural and urban regions of the EU and finally the "counter-urbanization" movements from cities to more accessible rural areas. These three phenomena are closely linked to the issue of demographic aging which in turn interacts with aspects of economic development, reducing human capital in some regions and strengthening the capacity for diversification and innovation in others. Another very important social issue is the provision of basic services of general interest. In this sense,

¹ About the concept of Territorial Capital see De Rubertis *et al.*, 2018.

structural changes in rural areas would seem to be strongly linked to these social issues.

As indicated by the European Community (ENRD, 2019i), the rural development policy for the current programming cycle just aims to achieve these critical issues by adopting the following strategic objectives: promoting the competitiveness of agriculture; ensuring the sustainable management of natural resources and climate action; achieving a balanced territorial development of rural economies and communities, including the creation and maintenance of employment. As is known, rural development policy has undergone important changes over the past few years, moving from a productivist approach to a more territorial one not without difficulties especially in the concrete implementation on a local scale (Cejudo and Labianca, 2017). Moreover in the current programming cycle 2014-2020 another aspect to be considered is that the rural development policy takes a territorial and sectoral coordination approach, integrated and coordinated with the Europe 2020 strategy, then defining broader objectives, articulated in 6 priorities for intervention: transfer of knowledge and innovation, vitality and competitiveness of agricultural firms, food chain organization and risk management, restoration, conservation and improvement of ecosystems, a resource-efficient and climate-resilient economy, social inclusion and economic development (ENRD, 2019l).

In particular, priority 6, for which most European countries have allocated around 11-20% of the total planned public expenditure, aims to have a stronger impact on social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas by focusing on specific areas of intervention: a) facilitating diversification, creation and development of small businesses, as well as job creation (Focus Area 6A); b) promoting local development in rural areas (Focus Area 6B); c) improving the accessibility, use and quality of information and communication technologies (ICT) in rural areas (Focus Area 6C) (ENRD, 2019l).

A crucial aspect is that the distribution of public spending for this priority is mainly aimed at providing basic services and village renewal as well as applying the LEADER approach with the objective of fostering

local development. In this case, Italy and Spain, in the context of the measures available, have given significant weight to the LEADER's application (ENRD, 2016a). In this context, given the centrality to human and social capital in territorial development processes (De Rubertis *et al.*, 2018) these important changes in the quality of human and social capital of rural communities, above all marginal ones (for example produced by the migration of young, qualified people), can frustrate any attempt at changing especially concerning local governance and preclude the start of real development paths based on the real needs of the communities, essential elements in the implementation of the LEADER approach.

As is known, in fact, from the beginning LEADER seemed to be strongly consistent with the characteristics of specific rural areas (Leader European Observatory, 1997) that is those areas that suffer from situations of marked physical isolation and with obvious structural limits, along with the continuous population decline and poorly productive agriculture. They are therefore territories subject to intervention by the LEADER which by its nature plays a fundamental role in building local capacities coherently with the needs expressed by the communities, in fact "since it was launched in 1991, the LEADER has been working to provide rural communities in the EU with a method for involving local partners in the future development of their area" (EC, 2006, p. 5).

It is a "laboratory" for innovation for building local capacities and for solving problems in rural areas, especially those that are more depressed (Leader European Observatory, 1997). In fact the LEADER as it is known operates through a 'bottom up' and strongly territorial approach (among others Schucksmith, 2000; EC, 2006) and allows through "soft' organizational forms to bring out" a 'reflexive' and 'strategic' (Clarke and Stewart 1994) rationality of governance, based on the local communication and knowledge-sharing, upon the negotiated construction of multi-input (public and private) developmental strategies and upon their operationalization within appropriately defined spaces (not necessarily the classic spaces of either market or state or their own particular interrelationship)" (Buller, 2002, p. 191). Moreover, throughout Europe, the LEADER now represents the legitimate tool for elaborating local

development plans and one of the possibilities to intervene in the most marginal areas even in the integration of the national level.

However, recent experiences show lights and shadows of the LEADER approach, not only in the construction of effectively participated and bottom-up strategies (among others Belliggiano and Salento, 2017; De Rubertis, 2013; Navarro *et al.*, 2016; Cejudo and Labianca, 2017; Dax *et al.*, 2016) but above all in the territorial imbalances produced (Cañete *et al.*, 2018).

In this chapter, starting from this general context and the literature, the aim is to understand the current situation in rural marginal areas and the specific indications, innovations emerging. The review of the literature revealed a large number of recurrent problems and narratives concerning these territories, briefly discussed in section 2. These narratives represented a crucial starting point for selecting and analyzing current practices in Europe, especially according to the LEADER philosophy. Modalities and characteristics of some cases and innovative examples of projects facing the problem of depopulation and aging will be examined in sections 3 in order to provide final suggestions and indications for the ongoing European strategy.

2. A narrative framework based on the literature

As already anticipated, in order to understand the current dynamics and the problems affecting the European marginal rural areas, the present research was developed on a dual level: a theoretical and practical analysis. In the first case it was necessary to reconstruct the theoretical framework starting from a selection and study of the literature, while in the second case it was necessary to make a reasoned selection of the practices underway in these territories. Therefore, in this section the most recurring narratives concerning the marginal areas are briefly presented, representing the common thread for the subsequent selection of projects.

Lack of concrete policies to face problematics of deep rural areas. This first narrative focuses on the inexistence of specific policies inside the European Union, and in this way, in Italy and Spain, about sparsely

populated areas (Pinilla and Sáez, 2017; Langreo and García, 2019), to deal with their specific social and geographical problematics and needs. Infact, “the diversity of rural areas by public policies that impact in rural territories have not sufficiently incorporated in their objectives and measures” (Sánchez-Zamora, 2014, p. 23). In spite of EU rural policies have, in the past, used the twin concepts of disparity and diversity in alternative ways, they have never really acknowledged the different assumptions that underlie them in terms of rural development and policy implementation (Saraceno, 2013).

Globalization, demographic change and financial crisis increase the differences through rural areas and the difficulty of some of these getting into the development train. In addition, this kind of policies and initiatives have to include too the positive and negative impacts of globalization on rural areas and rural development, “creating real dangers that the rural poor will be left behind by lack of skills, capital and access to resources” (Woods, 2016, p. 489). Marginalisation of some rural areas is “part and parcel of a growing spatial disparity, and embedded in broader processes of social change. (...) what happens in depopulating rural communities is not locally produced but rather a consequence of large socioeconomic and political changes” (Bock, 2016, p. 557). Only a small number of areas are able to use the opportunities offered by globalization. On the other hand, the global financial crisis, with the dominant public austerity discourse contributes to increase these territorial disparities. Additionally, “the diffusion of innovation in disadvantaged rural areas through the practice of local development depends on (...) the extremely hard consequences of contemporary demographic change” (Lacquement, 2016, p. 159).

LEADER approach didn't establish concrete measures for sparsely populated areas. This defect is shared also by the practice of neo-endogenous rural development. The LEADER approach, born in 1991, specifically designed for rural areas, to face territorial inequalities and the problematics they generate, such as ageing and depopulation, “did not offer an operational definition of rural areas. With its bottom-up, participatory approach, the existing differences and diversities between rural areas were automatically accounted for through tailored actions” (Saraceno, 2013, p.

342). This approach, therefore, avoids to specify a list of typology of rural areas. "The discourse of LEADER eludes community with territory, as an unproblematic and homogeneous "community of place". Yet it has long been established that community of place are far from homogeneous and include many "communities of interest" with highly unequal capacities to act" (Shucksmith, 2000, p. 208). In this way, its particular features (bottom-up approach, innovation, creation of local public-private partnerships, participation in local decision making, interterritorial cooperation, multisectoral integration, networking and area-based approach) (European Commission, 2006), don't fit with the weaknesses and special particularities of rural areas with hard problematics of ageing and depopulation. Another aspect concerns innovation, its fostering especially in social sense (Labianca *et al.*, 2016), producing demonstrative effects or generating participation in local decision making in rural areas without entrepreneurs or a right critical mass. The experimental nature of LEADER projects and its participatory nature (High and Nemes, 2007) hardly can be carried out in these kind of territories. Probably the first question to consider is the own draft of the approach, starting "from recognition of the diversity that exists in the social character of rural communities" (Barke and Newton, 1997, p. 320). Another aspect to take into consideration is that the LEADER implementation has been considered as a minor tool. It can't be forgotten that this initiative has always been seen as a "relatively minor instrument, with little impact on the principal areas of rural policy intervention" (Saraceno, 2013, p. 343).

Inadequate and poor results in these areas of the practice of neo-endogenous rural development. This inaccurate way understanding the complexity of rural areas, together with other contextual factors, has produced unexpected results in the distribution of LEADER investments in areas with a small business base, as it has been noted by several authors (Bock, 2016; Leco *et al.*, 2017; Nieto and Cárdenas, 2015 and 2018; Navarro *et al.*, 2018b; among others). It has been pointed out that: "the effects of rural development have been uneven, and differences between well-to-do and marginal rural areas have been increasing both across and within countries" (Bock, 2016, p. 552).

Thus, “in some territories, the achievement of the objectives (removing emigration, increasing economic activities,...) has not had the expected results, due, above all, to the scarcity of economic resources (...) and the excessively negative conditions of their starting situation (some very aged, isolated areas with an inexistent economic base)” (Nieto and Cárdenas, 2015, p. 158). But to understand this last affirmation, it has to be noted that demographic aging in these *deep rural areas* is one of the most serious obstacles to generate rural development. Infact, “the social and population decapitalization that increasingly moves these spaces away from their recovery and greatly hinders the application and effectiveness of rural development policies” (Leco *et al.*, 2017, p. 97). But problems result not from the reduced number of inhabitants in these areas, “but also from the loss of specific groups, for instance, the young, highly educated or economically active. This puts under stress not only economic prosperity but also potentially the reservoir of social and cultural capital, which, in turn and on the longer term, may be expected to undermine the community’s capacity to act and regenerate” (Bock, 2016, p. 557). At the same time, procedures to obtain a grant in the LEADER initiative, with its high bureaucratic component, reduce the possibilities and opportunities of the entrepreneurs of these areas to obtain funds, caused of their low level of economic solvency and greater risk when generating their businesses, as has been proved in several studies (Navarro *et al.*, 2018a; Cañete *et al.*, 2018), giving place to a high number of *failed projects*.

So, these areas are perceived as a place for losers, places without projects, when confronted to those winners and which have projects. Only the most resourceful rural areas are able to generate innovations, in some cases interesting cases of social innovation. In this sense rural development programmes could even promote further spatial disparity.

Some opportunities haven’t been sufficiently taken into account. The incorporation and involvement into this kind of initiatives of knowledge and skills brought by immigrants who coming from another territories has been reduced according to several authors. The potential of international migrants has not been prominently incorporated into this kind of development strategies for deep rural areas. “The transformative capacity

of international migration in rural areas is not only economic, but is not only social and cultural. Migrants introduce new cultural, tastes, consumer goods, traditions and festivals into rural communities which are inevitably blended and grafted with endogenous cultural practices and resources" (Woods, 2016, p. 588).

Even so, *the practice of neoendogenous rural development has experienced a huge number of contributions and good practices in this kind of rural areas*. Of course this includes the promotion of the specific features of the LEADER mentioned earlier. In fact, for example, the existence of Local Action Groups (LAGs), "capable of promoting resilience and enabling these communities to overcome the challenges being faced, (...), because of their ability to overcome social break-up and the lack of involvement amongst the local population in the policies that affect them" (Martínez *et al.*, 2015, p. 44).

Also, its schemes have had an acknowledged impact upon the definition and promotion of local territorial identity" (Buller, 2002, p. 192). Neoendogenous development practice fostering social innovation, the valorization of territorial capital and using extra-local capital has obtained in marginal municipalities interesting experiences of development projects and development practices, creating with these initiatives, new identities in these territories (Belliggiano *et al.*, 2018).

Actions directed to foster economic diversification, rural tourism, environmental protection, proximity of public and private services, promotion of small and medium enterprises, the improvement of infrastructures, have obtained successful experiences in a large number of deep rural areas (Nieto and Cárdenas, 2018), "with the objective of retaining the existing populations or encouraging people to move from urban centres into otherwise declining rural zones" (Buller, 2002, p. 193).

In the next section, the practices in these areas will be examined through a selection of the projects on a European scale.

3. A narrative framework based on practices facing depopulation and aging in Europe

In this phase of the research it was necessary to understand how these areas are working to address the problems afflicting them. Some of the main topics emerged from previous analysis to fight against depopulation, aging and marginalization in rural areas. Therefore, in this section, not pretending to provide a comprehensive view of current practices, a selection of projects in progress in the European territories was made through the choice of specific keywords. The projects come from the official database by European Network of Rural Development (ENRD 2019m) and offer an interesting overview of what is happening in these territories. In this section the projects summarized, are discussed in a narrative manner, in order to identify peculiar and common elements.

3.1. Delivering services, mobility and logistic issues

The initiative *La Exclusiva*, was designed to face the long-term demographic decline by improving the quality of life of those remaining in the rural areas of Soria (Spain), particularly the elderly people, maintaining retail services in sparsely populated areas. This company extended the range of services it offers, including electronics, gardening, laundry and dry-cleaning services. *La Exclusiva*, developed in 2013, by using private sources (about 3,000 euros) is much more than a social enterprise, bringing hope to elderly people keeping them living in their villages (ENRD, 2018d).

The project *Childcare services for the Metsküla community in Stonia*, was created when the local kindergarten closed, using a cultural association in a little Estonian village a European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development funding to set up childcare services. Beside enhancing the quality of life of the local families with young families with young children, the project had a positive impact on the whole community. The project showed how a local association can provide a much-needed public service by allowing people to work together in order to meet the needs of

their community. The promoter was a NGO (Metsküla Küla Selts, with a total budget of 49,792 euros) (ENRD, 2019h).

Rezo Pouce, supported under LEADER tackled mobility issues in rural areas by providing a safe and freeway for people to car share on short journeys between key locations. LAG “Grand Pic Saint-Loup” was the promoter (the project has a budget of 23,771 euros).

3.2. Promotion of high speed internet and online services

Digitalization and online services are considered a way of improving services in sparsely populated rural areas. LEADER and the LAGs play a key role in triggering and animating. For example, the project *Borja with all five senses* has been supported by the LAG ASOMO in Aragón (Spain) to transform the village into a completely accessible town for its citizens, as well as for tourists, including people with disabilities.

In a similar way, *Telemedia for companies* promoted by the LAG ADAI Comarca de la Sidra and Big Health Data Consulting S.L., in Cabranes (Asturias, Spain), facilitated access to preventive health and medical consultation for rural people through a medical teleconsultation digital platform (ENRD, 2019e).

Multiservice hubs, is a network of coworking spaces to attract entrepreneurs in Catalonia (Spain), this interterritorial project was launched by 10 LAGs: 14 new coworking spaces (130 professionals). It is a shared space where synergies among people can arise and flourish (ENRD, 2018d).

In *Digi-hub for elderly people*, the Finnish Suodenniemi Association that supports local development in a remote villages in the Tampere region had the idea to establish a digital hub and advisory point in a village library. The objectives were: to improve the computer and other digital device literacy of Suodenniemi residents, especially the elderly; help develop and adopt new digital services in a community that has suffered from depopulation and many public and private services being close down; improve the library services and multi-use of the public space. The hub helps elderly people to benefit from digitalization and quickly emerging new online services related to health, banking, shopping and

social relations among others. This hub is assisting three people per day and many private companies, such banks, pharmacies and software suppliers, which had closed down their physical service points in Suodenniemi have been very committed to playing a part in the project, through their e-services. The budget was 27,100 euros during the period 2014-2020. The lessons were related with: the biggest challenge is how to reach the more passive target groups, who don't use social media and whose digital presence is quite weak; the trust given by the person who works in the hub, the users trust him and can talk about very personal issues with him; and many customers expressed a wish for the service to continue after the project support ends.

In Dordogna (France), a *school for digital transition*, LAG of Pays de Bergerac through a LEADER project has accompanied local businesses helping to digital transition. The training supported to entrepreneurs to define coherent digital strategies and identify new opportunities and markets (the total cost was 61,864 euros) (ENRD, 2018d).

Broadband expansion and upgrade on Samso, supported the extension and upgrade of a high-speed internet connection on the Danish island of Samso (Denmark). It has attracted new residents, tourists and businesses and ultimately helped to stop depopulation. LAG "LLSAE" made access to stable, high speed wifi connection a priority in its Local Development Strategy. The beneficiary was Samso Broadband Association, with a budget of 78,310 euros. About 800-1000 existing residents benefited from the improved connection. In the same way, it attracted new people to the island through increased workplace facilities. In addition, it increased the average number of days that leisure residents spend on the island per visit and it helped to maintain and create jobs.

And finally, *Smart Villages*, which is a European Pilot Project on Smart and eco-social villages, being integrated, frequently, into LEADER/CLLD local development strategies (LDS). LAGs can provide integrated packages of Smart Villages support through their LDS to communities in the LAG territory. However, as the ENRD LAG survey revealed, it is necessary to overcome many barriers, such as excessive bureaucracy and

administration that limit the potential for using LEADER to support *Smart villages* in many parts of Europe (ENRD, 2019c).

These examples illustrate the importance of ensuring a combination of: good internet connectivity; ensure appropriate skills; the take up of digital innovation; and “smart” initiatives/plans that respond to existing rural challenges and/or take advantage of the development opportunities that digital technologies can provide.

3.3. Youth and generational renewal

Through LEADER approach, LAGS often identify approach often identify support to youth as a priority of their Local Development Strategies. Thus, firstly, the *Odisseu-bringing back the youth to rural areas*, is a LEADER project that supports generation renewal by promoting employment opportunities in the rural areas of Catalonia (Spain), promoted by LAG Alt Vegell-Cerdanya, being a response to the rural youth exodus that aims to provide solutions for generational renewal and fight the brain drain. It was developed in 2016 and 2017 (with a budget of 100,214 euros). Through a range of diverse activities, the project accompanies young people interested in learning more about the opportunities that exist in rural areas for professional initiatives. It is fostering entrepreneurship and improving the employability of young people as well as their engagement with the rural territory of origin. Its main objectives were: to promote the return of young people in rural areas; stop the aging of the rural population; promote the professional integration of young people in rural areas; raise awareness among businesses on the added value that young people represent for their companies and reinforce links between business and universities. The main results were: 20 workshops held in 12 educational centres; 8 informative actions and in 2016 the first Oddiseum Practicum was convened, which led to 12 grants for companies located in rural municipalities being nominated in order to host paid professional internships for university students (300 hours, compensation of 5 euros per hour, 50% cofinancing by the company). Since October 2016, through the Retorna online tool, 367 young people, mostly women, enrolled in 17 different professional sectors and have shown interest in working in

several rural districts. Learnt lessons were: joint work between the LAGs and the network of youth professionals; necessity to ensure flexibility when choosing the actions to be implemented according to each territory, using many and diverse actions better adapted to local needs (although this can hinder harmonisation of results of the overall project); difficulties to involve universities in a project and establish contact with university students as well as other young people who have already left the area, that is why the project holders continue to test different methodologies and have opted to intervene before young people leave the area (ENRD, 2018c).

Thanks to *Agroberry-original from Zamora, Spain*, supported by LEADER, with a budget of 55,985 euros, having as a timeframe 2015-2019, a young female farmer introduced a blackberry plantation into a wheat production area and created added value by developing a new range of products, returning to the countryside and innovating. She established an organic blackberries plantation, created one full-time job and five temporary jobs, becoming an attraction for agritourism. The entrepreneurship in rural areas is difficult, but it is also extremely satisfying, encouraging educated young people to settle in small areas so that they can close the agri-food circle and thus offer producers more profit margin and improved competitiveness (ENRD, 2019f).

Finally, *Networking for generational renewal in the Czech Republic*. The Czech National Rural Network organised seminars and site visits on farms and in high schools for agriculture to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and experiences between older and younger farmers. The initiative aimed to increase the prestige of farming in the eyes of the younger generation and to promote family farming among high school students in agriculture. The project organised four interactive one-day seminars during 2018. The seminars took place in four different Czech regions and farms (the budget was of 9,491 euros) (ENRD, 2019h).

3.4. Social inclusion and settlement of migrants

A key theme for these areas is certainly social inclusion, but only eight projects are identified, of which two in Sweden, one each in Germany,

Finland, Poland, Slovenia, Spain and UK. These projects belong to priority 6, entitled “Social inclusion and local development”, in particular 3 of them directly concern measure 7 “Basic services and village renewal”, 5 instead measure 19 “LEADER / CLLD”.²

Starting from the projects aimed at providing basic and village renewal services, it is interesting to note that the projects selected in this work started from the actual needs of the communities, favoring the solution of urgent problems and the important impacts and benefits extended to the entire community living in marginal areas.

In fact the projects aim at involving population groups with a serious risk of social exclusion, such as: the need to involve migrants following the increase in the number of asylum seekers in the *FagerstaSödra – Supporting immigrants* (Sweden) project, to create new and renewed services for the entire community, including those who are suffering from dementia or Alzheimer in *Tackling Dementia in rural areas* (UK), to resolve major critical issues in the economic and social context produced by the serious crisis of 2008 and the negative effects that have been reached serious levels in the younger population (variety of problems such as loneliness, mental health, drug abuse, social exclusion) in the project *Making rural youth visible* (Finland).

Trying to identify the common elements of these projects, they are different. In particular these projects are producing more extensive and significant impacts because they started from the actual needs of the community (although the methods of involvement should be deepened), with interesting benefits for specific categories of disadvantaged individuals and subsequently extended to the entire community thanks to new and renewed services that have created new cohesion and a sense of belonging even outside the rural areas, also favoring the attractiveness of these areas. Another common element of these projects is the capacity, contextual knowledge of the actors involved and promoters, a historic Sport Club (Fagersta Södra IK), community reference point for the first project in Sweden, a non-profit Community center supported by

² For details about projects see ENRD (2019m), https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/projects-practice_en

Learmount Community and Development Group Ltd for the UK project and Hämeenkyrö municipality for Finland. For the other five projects of the same priority but under Measure 19 (LEADER/CLLD) obviously the LAGs are the main promoters. Reading the projects clearly they show the innovative, laboratorial, social approach, which characterizes the LEADER approach.

Empowering, education and involvement of the local community, in particular young immigrants, are gathered in *Ny på landet - Rural Newcomers project* in Sweden. This project dated 2011, was born as an interregional cooperation one between three LEADER areas in Sweden, evolved thanks to the role of experts working with passion, the old leaders and former participants are in fact volunteers and contribute to the development of practical knowledge to be transferred to new experts. In 2017 the project received an award for best project on the social inclusion of migrants and aims to integrate young immigrants aged 16-25 into Swedish society through nature and outdoor learning. The project led by a group of young leaders (migrants themselves) aims to improve the understanding of the Swedish countryside and awareness of access to rural areas. The objectives of the project include the reduction of gender differences too. The activities were facilitated by a rural civic group as experts in orientation activities, and knowledge of the territory. Currently the project is managed by Folkungaland, a LEADER area that covers seven municipalities in eastern Sweden and among the many activities to encourage and promote cooperation between local rural population and young immigrants through micro-subsidies. Further elements relating to the LEADER approach are certainly the recognized role of networking in particular the project has favored connections between the public and private sectors, with the civil community and local organizations.

The second project under the LEADER approach is *Digital exclusion - Workshops to combat digital exclusion in rural areas* from Poland. Starting from the local need to improve local digital skills, the LAG launched a series of activities to encourage the learning of people over 50 with a risk of exclusion. The project, in addition to eliminating important barriers in terms of knowledge and equipment allocation, has favored the

participation of local organizations by encouraging the exchange and launching of social initiatives with important effects on strengthening the shared social capital. An important element is the participation in the project of people who covered social functions in the community such as: a village leader, a municipal councilor, the chairman of a municipal council, members of the local Village Housewives' Clubs, members of folk singing groups, people running agritourism farms, firefighters and other residents, members of parish choirs, orchestras, brass bands, seniors clubs, retired teachers, farmers and people with disabilities. The heterogeneity of the participants favored the exchange of knowledge and experiences among the members, strengthening cooperation and mutual learning. Due to the innovative nature of the project and the significant impacts produced on the community, they have inspired other local leaders to spread the practice in the area of the LAG, which is therefore not exclusively aimed at developing digital competences of participants but above all social capital building.

The third project entitled *Supporting a healthy lifestyle for all generations* is from Slovenia, specifically in the northern area bordering Austria, the Meža valley, a predominantly rural and mountainous area with serious economic and social problems due to the closure of mining activities in 2008, with negative impacts on the health of the population. Starting from the critical context, the project tried to start a more active approach to improve the quality of life and health of the inhabitants. Periodically the representatives of the four municipalities, Črna na Koroškem, Mežica, Prevalje and Ravne na Koroškem, met to discuss common needs and foster cooperation. Thus, a partnership was established together with the LAG in order to develop a joint project focusing mainly on the provision of outdoor recreational infrastructure for all generations. The general objectives aimed at improving the physical and mental health of the whole community. A lot of coordination, communication and attention was needed for the very complex project. Therefore, it was necessary to start mapping activities in order to create infrastructures respecting the protected sites of the natural and cultural heritage, prerequisites and at the same time to favor the coordination of activities. An interesting element of

the project was the ability of the various actors to collaborate in different phases from the planning to the operational activities, in fact the management and administration of the project were carried out by the LAG, while the municipality of Ravne na Koroškem had the task of coordinating the investments and to launch public procurement procedures for all municipalities. In addition, the project to providing for the construction of facilities for the outdoors and fitness was supported by dissemination activities for health involving the whole community, especially the students of all the schools in different locations in the LAG area. Additional elements of added value of the project were: the capacity to enhance and raise awareness of the areas that are part of the cultural or natural heritage, needing protection, the greater cooperation of the municipal administration with local civil society and public organizations (sports clubs, pensioners' associations, intergenerational centers, schools and kindergartens), the latter having become major players in organizing recreational activities (total budget of 243,339 euros) (ENRD, 2018a).

The project entitled *Dobel-SpATZ* involved a small community in Germany, suffering due to a continuous abandonment by young people. The project stems from an idea formulated during a youth forum in 2015 and started from the need to create an accessible area for all the members of the community, consisting of a room for young people and a large playground for children, fitness areas and areas without architectural barriers for people with disabilities. In November 2016, the project was presented to the community trying to involve the largest number of interest groups. From this moment citizens, entrepreneurs, associations, seniors and schools have contributed by proposing different ideas. The project has brought together several directly engaged actors, being a joint venture of the community, the youth forum, citizens, companies and institutions. About 150 people took part in the concrete implementation of the project (total of 2000 inhabitants), this has progressively increased social cohesion and in terms of the final result the quality of life and the attractiveness of the area. The project was approved in 2017, receiving LEADER funding. The "Dobel-SpATZ" in Zwiefalten was conceived as a meeting place for the benefit of the entire community that actively

participated from the proposal of ideas to the actual realization of the site. In fact, many young people and volunteers contributed to the construction activities, allowing a considerable reduction in costs. The meeting point in the city has strengthened the sense of community to the benefit of all residents. It was a real community project in which young people actively participated in the creation of their environment and strengthened the cohesion of the community. The added value in the project lies in having directly involved young people in designing their community by entrusting them with tasks and responsibilities for the implementation of the project.

At last another project specific to the settlement of migrants is *Living Villages*. It is an international cooperation project that aims to create the conditions for reversing the depopulation problem in the rural areas of Aragón (Spain) between 2016 and 2019. As a pilot project, it establishes and tests a methodology of work that supports the population in rural areas and attracts new settlers. The budget was 100,063 euros and the project promotor was the LAG Centro de Desarrollo de Somontano. The project is based on the active involvement of local people and local administrations. Infact they benefit from a series of actions such as awareness raising and training, collection and publication of information of interest for new settlers, actions to support the local population to remain in their territory and actions to improve the attractiveness of the three areas involved. The main projects results were: 28 municipalities involved; 100 people participating in the network of volunteer collaborators; 30 awareness-raising actions to disseminate, information and exchange experiences, 28 municipal inventories of resources and utility services for new settlers; a website, to disseminated the municipal inventories and other information useful to potential new settlers; 20 initiatives tackling depopulation documented and analysed, including both successful and unsuccessful examples and finally, 8 groups/profiles of potential new settlers were identified. About lessons and recommendations can be noted: the involvement of the population and local actors —in this case through a network of volunteers— was key to the success of the initiative; flexibility, adapting the actions to the needs and characteristics of each specific case;

integrated action working on different aspects influencing rural depopulation like employment, housing, internet connection, communication network, services to the population, etc.; working in a network with other territories facilitates communication and the transferability of results; and networking value involving LAGs, volunteers, municipalities, associations and the local population (ENRD, 2019d).

3.5. Other topics

Reduction and simplification of bureaucratic procedures. *Rural tickets in Asturias*. Regional Government and the Asturias Network of Rural Development (Spain), created a grant based on the article 19.a.ii of the EU Regulation 1305/2013 (EAFRD), which allowed an assistance, being the easiest way to obtain financing, linking proposals and objectives, and removing the bureaucratic burden (no bills, no bank papers, no eligibility affairs). The grant is €25,000 compatible with the investment aim. It has allowed for small business initiatives to become a reality, among the activities: graphic designer, surf school manager, healthy products store, mountain guide, cultural tourism firm, multiservice shop, among others (ENRD, 2019a).

Empowering, participative and collaborative work in *It happens in Loco-Alto Minho Mountain*, a technical assistance project about empowering local actors to work more effectively with rural communities in order to revitalise these areas. The project activities included creating mechanisms and routines for sharing knowledge and resources, promoting networking and establishing links between people and partner institutions. The project improved the ability of local actors to draft and implement development strategies and improve the use of local resources. The budget was of 130,624 euros being the promoter the Regional Association for the Development of Alto Lima. The focus was directed to improve networking routines and shared information, to establish trust-based relations between the technical team and the local community, and to set up multidisciplinary teams to carry out projects. The partners were

associations, schools, municipalities and agricultural cooperatives (ENRD, 2019g).

Valorization of heritage. *Converting abandoned parish houses to accommodate tourists*. It is a LEADER transnational cooperation project about a secondary use concept for abandoned parish houses. Five LAGs in Austria and Germany developed together a concept and marketing strategy for renting these houses to tourists. Each LAG identified at least one pilot house to present it as its sample object. A group of experts with stakeholders from each cooperation partner educated project partners in adapting the buildings to accommodate tourists and to promote and run these places. The next step was to develop a webpage as common booking platform. It was developed in the years 2016 to 2018, with a budget of 187,000 euros (ENRD, 2018b).

And finally, renewable energies. In Hungary, *Vox Dallis Development Association* is using bioeconomy to address local challenges of depopulation and ageing, through the introduction of energy crops: the yearly biomass production from these buffer strips could heat local households, and support complementary livestock activities that are benefiting over 100 local families. A second small-scale pilot scheme combining aquaponics, hydroponics, and renewable energy production could provide sustainable livelihood for new entrants (young families) moving into the territory (ENRD, 2019b).

4. Discussion and conclusions

In conclusion of this work it is possible to sketch some initial impressions and reflections. As emerged in the previous sections and also argued by Bock (2016) one of the main causes for the marginalization of rural areas has been historically and traditionally of geographical nature, but nowadays the question is of a wider scope. Infact the problems of accessibility is no longer a matter of simple access to resources of a material nature but must be understood in a broader sense, as emerges from the dual level of narration in this work.

In essence, these are social, relational, and economic connections, which therefore are not limited to geographical location only. As revealed from the literature review and the analysis of the current projects, it is evident that also thanks to the LEADER approach there has been an important change still in progress that has pushed to reconsider the role of these areas and above all of the communities living inside. Although in the background of different projects emerges the need to overcome limits due to the geography of places, for example of physical and immaterial accessibility, of basic services, in various projects it is possible to grasp the innovative spirit that is to build what are in reality the most complex connections, be they social, relational, or economic. Thus, it is not only physical isolation, but also social, immaterial, innovative and technological one, in this way, most of these projects put the focus on human and social capital. These projects focus on creativity, application of scientific knowledge (a basic key component of the territorial capital)³, the use of information and communication technologies and on the construction of new networks between different actors, collaborative and cooperative services, putting in contact different stakeholders.

Associated with this, it is noted the need to enlarge this kind of territories into functional areas, fostering “a process of cross-fertilisation in respect to these locally embedded relations among localities that belong to the same functional territory, and thus promote the emergence of joint social capital and embedded socio-economic relations beyond the limits of isolated localities” (Nordregio, 2012, p. 75). In this sense, it’s extremely important to promote functional areas, rural-urban linkages and “virtual proximities”, providing external knowledge, partnerships and markets (Bock, 2016). Urbanisation and rural marginalisation are, after all, two sides of the same coin. If social innovation is to fulfil its promises, rural-urban linkages must be reconsidered and revalued and interactions and mutual dependencies must be taken into account. The social innovation of marginal rural areas is, then, not only a task for individual and disadvantaged rural areas but a common concern.

³ See De Rubertis *et al*, 2018.

The low budget required for the analyzed projects, compared with others with a higher level of material and infrastructural component; their creativity and flexibility, matching funding with needs; the multiplicity of their aims and functions –productive and non productive and their long-term effects explain, in the same way, the specificity of these projects. Social inclusion is a long-term process that often exceeds the timeframe of formal programmes and concrete projects. Even, it is not enough to incorporate them in one local, bounded strategy for a concrete period, but also, for both or even more periods and for more rural areas. Successful social inclusion and innovation initiatives often take decades going beyond the single area. But, at the same time, it can not be forgotten the other ones, small and “easy projects”, those ones which are facilitating the daily life of local inhabitants: small business initiatives concerning basic services, most of them including interesting and creative technological innovations.

In addition, in the projects analyzed, it can be pointed, the increasingly important role of local empowerment that emerges. Often interventions are promoted by key actors, historical member of the community, or local institutions (politicians, local leaders, visionaries of innovations, schools, among others), enabling on-going exchange and communication; or start from initiatives by groups of potentially disadvantaged people (such as the elderly, young people, women, migrants and even farmers); being even, oriented to new and potential new settlers and not only for the local inhabitants. The role of local partnerships, such as LAGs, associations, local organizations, NGOs, and the full involvement of local inhabitants, are key factors to ensure the success of this kind of initiatives. This enormous enrollment transforms these projects into community, social and territorial projects, because they affect the good of the whole community the whole community, and not only to specific target groups. And finally, it is showed also the involvement of other external actors, such as National Networks of Rural Development and public actors. The empowerment and re-appropriation of living spaces in a physical and identity sense become central elements and usually is the first step in many projects. The provision of non-existent services, their organization is

often not limited to a few direct beneficiaries but generates multiplier effects in favor of the entire community. The creation of new relationships and relations of trust is inclusive, not limited to specific target groups but to the whole community, precisely because in many cases they are small communities where it should be even easier to experiment experiences of collaboration and participation. Obviously networking is an important aspect but the fact that it could be fictitious requires further study.

Another element concerns the representation of the needs, of the critical issues of the community that assumes a primary role in these areas. Some of the projects presented highlight these limits. Those that consider and start from the perception of the needs of the local community (for example starting from a forum) show signs of greater inclusion, concreteness and widening of the effects produced. Needs related to well being, quality of life, considering the hierarchy of these: food, safety, housing, employment, basic and multi services, etc.

Some projects under the stimulus of the LEADER have triggered paths for reconnecting people to places. The projects often start from overcoming problems and criticalities linked above all to the liveability in these areas, however they are not limited to these problems. At last, this should essentially be the added value in the current planning, the interventions in these areas should resolve real criticalities and at the same time favor a broader approach that concerns above all the living part of the territory. It is indeed through the human component and the attraction, motivation and cohesion of new energies, abilities, that it is possible to overcome the gap present in these areas. Therefore it is necessary to reconnect people to places, to foster capacity building and human resources, as emerges in various forward-looking projects. It is only by starting from the resources and above all from the human resources that a renaissance is possible in these areas. This should be the key point around which any intervention should take place, as advocated by the LEADER approach. Most of the projects mentioned are related, in the same way, with identity, sense of belonging, becoming attractive places, valorizing the image of these rural areas, supporting social and

territorial inclusion, the emergencing of characters that recall social innovation.

At the same time, it can't be forgotten the generic approach of LEADER, and the lacks which has not fitting with the problematics of the marginal rural areas. The self-help interpretation of rural development is not enough for these kind of territories. Therefore, this perspective has to be enriched with exogenous resources, different kind of policies, measures and approaches. Additionally, there is a need for more targeted support and funding with a focus on social inclusion within the Rural Development Programmes. LEADER projects are insufficient to achieve a complete break-through (ENRD, 2017), but they are excellent mirrors where to observe good practices. Therefore, this approach needs living rural territories with a strong organizational capacity and external assets to generate new opportunities and specific paths of development.

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