Introduction

In the latest programming cycles, rural development policy has undergone an important shift, moving from a purely sectorial and productivist approach to an integrated, territorial one. Rural development policy under the common agricultural policy (CAP) is acquiring particular importance and effectiveness in all European territories with the task of rediscovering the potential and capacity of the rural territories, in particular, more recently, of the inner peripheries.[1] As expressly argued by the original guide (EC, 2006) and widely recognized by the literature, LEADER has been indicated as a highly innovative approach within European rural development policy. As its name suggests, it should create, promote and support "Links between actions of rural development" basing its specific action especially on the human and social capital present in the territories. In fact it has been described as a sort of "laboratory for building local capabilities and for testing out new ways of meeting the needs of rural communities" (EC, 2006, p. 5).

Since its launch in 1991, LEADER in concomitance with CAP has evolved over time, together with the growing complexity of the agricultural sector. Its innovative strength, combined with the recognition of the diversity of European territories, has made it such an integral part of rural development policy that it has become a programme no longer separate but integrated ('mainstreamed') in particular during the recent

---

[1] See The National Strategy for Inner Areas, Ministero dello Sviluppo Economico (2014).

programming cycle 2007-2013 in all national/regional rural development programmes. As indicated by the programme guide (EC, 2006) its action should not be limited to economic and sectoral aspects, but should broaden the social objectives (such as ageing population, service provision, or a lack of employment opportunities…) to include the improvement of the quality of life, by encouraging "rural territories to explore new ways to become or to remain competitive, to make the most of their assets and to overcome the challenges they may face" (EC, 2006, p. 5). From this point of view, recognizing the inevitable evolution of the role of agriculture, LEADER adopts a new conception of innovation. In this context, as Dargan and Shucksmith (2008, p. 275) argue, "innovations have moved from a linear view"of knowledge and solutions "towards a model in which innovation is conceived as a co-evolutionary learning process occurring in the social networks of an array of actors". In this sense the territorial context plays a central, strategic role within LEADER, and the social factors take on a crucial importance, so it becomes fundamental to understand the context in which innovation takes place. This includes internal potentiality, structures and dynamics of government and governance rather than exclusively standardized externalities and factors.

Therefore, as can be deduced from Dargan and Shucksmith (2008), innovation is no longer to be considered an extraordinary, external event disconnected from the territory, but should become daily practice intimately linked to the community from which it originates, due precisely to the role played by LEADER. In this sense and as extensively discussed in previous research (Labianca, 2016; Belliggiano et al., 2018; De Rubertis et al., 2018a; Labianca et al., 2020), innovation cannot simply be based on mere technical and technological factors but should focus on the context in a broader sense, to avoid the risk of ineffectiveness of development projects.

By adopting this conception, the LEADER approach therefore looks at the territory in its complexity and uniqueness, focusing attention mainly on intangible components (Belliggiano et al., 2018; Labianca at al., 2020). In this perspective the territory isn't "simply a geographical extension of land or space within which a certain set of rules apply, or even as a

technical support base for productive activities" but rather "a space not only for production but also for social reproduction", in which the objectives must necessarily be defined starting from the bottom through a participatory, integrated (Labianca et al., 2020, p. 115), inclusionary and visionary approach. The intent of the shift from a sectoral to a more territorial approach of the LEADER approach is now widely recognized (among others Gkartzios and Scott, 2014; Cejudo and Labianca, 2017; Ray, 2001; Cejudo and Navarro, 2020; Dax, 2015).

In this book, based on the research experience conducted over these years, the criticalities and limits of this change are progressively addressed and discussed. The innovative character of LEADER needed to be better defined, because it could not simply concern processes, tools and modalities but had to foresee a more significant paradigm shift, to assume a visionary and strategic character. Regarding these last aspects, in this study it is believed that they can be directly mediated by the most recent planning practices and debates.

This monograph, which is the outcome of reflection on past observations, previous and current studies, discussion with scholars and international experts, seeks to provide a critical picture, both normative and constructive, of LEADER, with special attention to the local level, in view of the future programming, in order to better understand the LEADER approach through the examination of its main characteristics in which the transition from a territorial to a visionary approach clearly emerges. The assumption that guides this work, explained in the course of the different sections, it is based on a misunderstanding created especially on an operational level.

As will be discussed below in greater depth, in order to get a better understanding of the crucial and often contradictory aspects in the practice of LEADER, we will rely on various sources of information and inspiration: firstly, we will use the findings of previous research studies conducted with international collaboration (see Cejudo and Labianca, 2017; De Rubertis et al., 2015; 2018a; 2018b; 2019a; 2019b; 2020; Labianca 2016; Labianca et al., 2016; 2020; Labianca and Navarro, 2019); secondly, we will select and reformulate results from significant studies carried out

in the international network by researchers working for years on this topic; thirdly, we will take as a reference point one of the best-known works by Healey (1997) and combine, integrate it by current and ongoing research and applications. In the end we will obtain a sort of litmus test to use on an operational and regulatory level for a possible interpretation of the rural development practices (Sections 5 and 6). On the basis of the considerations emerged, an attempt will be made to formulate a logical framework that allows to compare different and opposite approaches.

Two approaches of LEADER will be compared, the main characteristics that distinguish the two approaches: sectoral/traditional and visionary will be explained and can be taken as indicators for the understanding, interpretation and self-assessment of practices on a local scale (Section 6).

A careful and critical analysis of the characteristics of the LEADER from a programmatic point of view (Sections 1 and 2) will lead to some significant experiences, first in the European context (Section 3) and then at local level (Section 4). This last section is both an application and the normative part regarding possible policy recommendations, here a regional case will be examined, which in the activity conducted, is both representative and significant at a national level. According to our argument, the litmus tests are the process and the style of planning adopted in the territories. Infact, this case, which has already been studied in previous research, will now be subjected to a critical rethinking using the interpretative tools developed in the present analysis, in order to formulate new policy suggestions.

On the other hand, in the course of this work, our review of the spatial planning literature has shown that the research by Healey (1997) is crucial to our study since it offers conceptual and methodological tools that at a certain point made us envisage a change of approach in LEADER, following a visionary approach.

Infact, as Healey (1997) argues, the impulse for the elaboration of a spatial strategy usually arises from particular institutional situations both internal and external. In our case LEADER generates a mobilization as well as a social and political incentive to do something about the issue. A

situation of change arises when one goes beyond the feeling that "something must be done" to obtain support for an organizational effort.

In particular there must be a situation of contradiction and conflict, which encourages people to recognize that they need collaborative planning processes in which to reflect on what they are doing and recognize the need to work with different people. All this makes processes and territories evolve (Ibid., p. 269). One of the critical resources at this stage is the ability to read the "cracks" through which new ideas can seep, to see the opportunities to do things differently, and be able to enlarge a "crack" into a real potential for change. And it is precisely in these circumstances that specific actors have the ability to recognize moments of opportunity and mobilize networks around the idea of involvement in the strategy process.

These actors are the LAGs under the LEADER approach. They are recognized as "activators", because they can play a crucial role in planning processes. They can arise from all kinds of institutional contexts and relationships, and their ability lies in being able to see and articulate possible strategies anchored to the territory. But they should have "the capacity for an acute sense of the relation between the structural dynamics of local economic, social and political relations and how these are manifest in what particular people in a place are bothered about". Inside the arenas of discussion "the initiators have to mobilise interest and engagement. This means thinking about who to get involved, where to meet and how to conduct discussion. These choices are critical, both in terms of the likely future support for, and ownership of, whatever emerges, and for whether the resultant mobilisation effort is of a corporatist or inclusionary nature" (Ibid., p. 270). Only a few actors carry responsibility for initial moves and actually are real activators, especially under the neo-endogenous approach.

In Healey's work, which is the result of a complex review of the planning literature, important aspects emerge that we have selected because we believe they can be applicable in rural development policies. In particular two different approaches must be distinguished, that is, one

characterized by potential democratic inclusion and the other that can strengthen the domination of a few powerful people.

The first refers to an "inductive ethics", in which the issue is to understand who the members of the community of stakeholders are and how they should obtain access to the arena so that their "points of view" can be appreciated and listened to, participating fully in the process.

The second idea recognizes a change in the "where" of the strategic discussion, providing for different arenas and times, in which case the discussion passes from a discursive "opening" to consolidation around consequent ideas, actions and values, generating the danger of a discursive closure towards the positions and problems raised earlier. Therefore what differentiates the quality of an inclusive approach is that the style and ethics of the context of the discussion enable stakeholder awareness to be promoted and supported throughout the process by focusing attention on all the requests raised by interested parties.

Regarding vision and consensus building, it is important to underline the shift from a rationalist, technological perspective to a social-constructivist one. The former was pervasive in planning and political practice and although it contains many ideas and principles, it is limited by its assumptions of instrumental rationality and objective science; the latter operates in the context of socially produced knowledge.

In the interactive perspective, strategies and policies are not the result of objective and technical processes, but are actively produced in social contexts. Interactive approaches that have slowly developed in the discussion of decision making, do however concern coordination mechanisms, social construction and articulation of strategies (Ibidem).

In the following paragraphs we will try to critically examine these assumptions more in depth, through an analysis of the most relevant literature, focusing on the basic elements of the LEADER approach.

This study therefore intends to make a critical review of the LEADER approach in the aftermath of the 2007-2013 programming cycle. The crucial role of this cycle made it such an integral part of rural development policy that it has become a programme that is no longer separate but integrated ('mainstream') in all national/regional rural development

programmes. Based on previous and current research, the key assumption of this study is that it is now over-simplistic to talk about the change from a sectoral productivist approach to a territorial one and that instead the LEADER method needs to undergo a visionary rethinking through a paradigm shift in planning and governance practices and styles.

According to our assumption, which will be explained in the course of the monograph, a misunderstanding has been created especially on an operational level, around the key features of the LEADER method, which has ended up in an over-simplification of processes and practices, making them ineffective on a local level and producing, re-producing rethoric about development.

This pressing invitation comes from Healey's work and reflections emerged on the field, which we re-propose since it is fully compatible with planning in a rural context, and which will provide valuable recommendations and tools for interpretation of processes above all on a local scale. As we will see later, this local scale is absolutely crucial from the operative point of view in LEADER.

Therefore, starting from the central idea of a change in approach, three stages will be outlined, each serving for the formulation of the following stage. This step-by-step process starts from a presentation and analysis of LEADER's main features and leads to the formulation of operational instruments and policy recommendations applicable above all on a local level. In fact, despite the clear specification on the programmatic level of the basic characteristics and principles of LEADER, contained in the main guides regularly published by the European Commission (which are also an important historical memory of its actual functioning, role, objectives and evolution over time), unfortunately, as we will show, they are only partly implemented or indeed assume a merely rhetorical value in terms of their application in the local context.

In the first part we will therefore try to present LEADER based largely on prior research, making a rapid survey of its development over time and identifying the key concepts revolving around the approach which often suffer oversimplification, especially that of innovation. We will then try to provide a critical reading of LEADER, through our review of the

literature, the previous research and the programmatic documents focusing on the key features in order to get a better understanding of the potentialities, limits and critical issues in the different practices, and will lastly devise a logical framework for a reading of practices and for self-assessment. In these stages and the subsequent ones, Healey's research will serve as a thread of continuity that will accompany us in the gradual development of our idea on the evolution of the LEADER approach, bringing out the main features and the styles of different planning approaches.

The critical reading of LEADER's key features will be conducted firstly from the programmatic point of view and then through the analysis of practices. An analysis will be made of international practices, trying to show their limits and critical aspects. A rapid survey will be made of some of the comparative international research by leading scholars who have made a major contribution in analysis and assessment of the practices during the 2007-2013 programming cycle (such as Dax et al., 2016; Belliggiano et al., 2020; Lacquement and Chevalier, 2016; Pylkkänen et al., 2015; Navarro et al., 2020), a pivotal cycle for the role assigned to Leader. These studies have significant features in common, essentially related to the difficulties of adapting and implementing LEADER on a local level.

While from the programmatic point of view the interpretation of the key features is clear, it is on the local level that problems emerge. There are persistent critical aspects in the style and processes of governance and planning adopted. What emerges is a traditional productivist approach which has revealed important critical issues in the implementation of the initiative on a local scale and which seem to be entrenched in traditional forms of institutionalized planning and participation, all of which poses limits on the construction of alternative scenarios for development.

By contrast, when the approach reflects the style of governance and planning of a pro-visionary kind (as will emerge for Finland in the discussion of the International cases) leading to a situation closer to the LEADER method, significant results emerge (Section 3). Therefore, since the local level is the strategic one for the action and at the same time is a testing ground for the effectiveness of LEADER, the next step will be to

make an in-depth analysis of the experiences that are most significant and representative in a national perspective, namely the situation of the Puglia region. This region, under the convergence objective, has made a considerable investment in innovation in governance and planning in recent years, with a larger investment in LEADER in the 2007-2013 cycle, and more than any other represents a testing ground for LEADER at a national level. The regional case will be examined with reference to previous research but mainly through internal evaluation reports and programming documents which reveal a return to a more central positioning of LEADER in the 2014-2020 programming cycle but also the persistence of historical problems and criticalities (Section 4).

However, the reconstruction of the strategies adopted in the European countries and the emblematic case of the Puglia region will highlight some limits and critical issues that confirm the need to rethink the approach and above all highlight the need to find ways to interpret the processes and provide recommendations for self-assessment and policy suggestions.

In the last part of the study therefore we will try to reflect on planning styles, strategies and approaches in order to devise a logical interpretative framework for self-assessment and future policy suggestions. The main approaches to rural development will be summed up, along with the main features emerging during our study. These premises are considered important in establishing the perspective within which we move if we need to explore planning strategies suited to the rural context, following the line established in Healey's work (1997).

Finally, by reconstructing the two main perspectives to planning, rationalist technological to a social-constructivist one, we will try to underline the crucial aspects which previously emerged, compatible with the strategies adopted in the LEADER method. We will thus obtain, on the regulatory level, a logical framework, believed to be useful and that could enable insiders to interpret their practices critically and open an important debate with greater awareness about the major critical issues of their interpretation and adaptation of the LEADER method in their local context (Section 5).

This conception will be further developed in the last part of this study, where on the basis of the results obtained we try to explain the factors behind the idea that the LEADER method is probably moving in the direction of the visionary approach in order to achieve full implementation especially on a local scale.

An attempt will be made to formulate a logical framework that sums up and compares different and opposing approaches to LEADER (sectoral/traditional and visionary) which we try to develop in this monograph. The study reconstructs the main features emerged and that distinguish the two approaches, taking into account the style and planning approach, the aims of a local project, the interpretation of innovation and of local resources, and the role of local actors. According to our assumption, these characteristics can reveal the approach adopted at the local level and can therefore be seen as indicators for the understanding, interpretation and self-assessment of practices on a local scale (Section 6).

These frameworks can be considered as typical cases we might expect to find in spatial strategies and plans based on a particular set of intellectual traditions and conceptualizations. These elements lead us to believe that there is an absolutely urgent need for a rethinking of the LEADER approach in a visionary perspective. As this study shows, it will certainly not be necessary to intervene on the basic characteristics but on their interpretation and formulation on a local scale. This will certainly require a different approach to planning than the traditional one and a marked cultural change in the attitude to local immaterial resources, above all human and social capital, towards a greater reflexive capacity and a new ethics in the style of discussion and planning.