



LEADER as a vehicle for neo-endogenous rural development in England

Gary Bosworth, Liz Price, Ivan Annibal, Jessica Sellick, Terry Carroll, John Shepherd¹

Abstract – LEADER emphasises neo-endogenous approaches where local rural development relies as much as possible on “bottom-up” activities. This research shows that the mainstreaming of LEADER saw certain compromises regarding the philosophical aspiration to give greater weight to local issues, local resources and local engagement. However, many LAGs learned to apply flexibility to meet local opportunities and challenges demonstrating how LEADER can empower local actors. Future challenges require LEADER to be more integrated with other rural policies and for the procedural elements to be simplified, especially for the smaller projects that have been found to make real impact at a very local level.

INTRODUCTION TO LEADER

LEADER was launched in 1991 as an area-based, bottom-up approach to rural development. Its philosophy concerns local communities developing innovative ways to generate local development by focusing on the potential of adding value to existing local resources, in line with neo-endogenous theories of rural development (Ray 2001). Moving away from top-down implementation can add value to the delivery of the other three axes within the Rural Development Programme (EU Court of Auditors Report, 2010).

Hubbard and Gorton (2011) noted that “Mainstreaming Leader may present additional management and coordination problems, and potentially diminishing returns” making this a particularly timely review. In the English context, the abolition of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and systematic shift towards a more localised approach to social and economic development, characterised by Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), Rural Growth networks and the Localism agenda, highlights a potentially valuable role for LEADER.

While the philosophy remains, the new rules, priorities and budgets for the future European Rural Development Programme are changing, making this a critical point at which to review key questions concerning (i) the balance of power between local actors and (trans)national objectives and (ii) the communication and networks that enable LEADER to function effectively at a local level.

METHODOLOGY

This research was carried out between November 2012 and March 2013 and comprised four main stages: A review of literature and other LEADER evaluations, a questionnaire sent to a range of rural stakeholders generating 549 responses, a set of interviews with a combined total of 83 key stakeholders and beneficiaries in selected Local Action Groups (LAGs) and (iv) two workshops to test

our findings with key personnel in LEADER policy and delivery roles.

The interview locations were identified based on a typology where all 64 LAGs were categorised according to topography (upland; lowland; plain, vale and heath), RDPE Axes and measures (Just Axis 3 or a combination of Axis 1 and Axis 3 measures) and the proportion of their budget spent by September 2012. The interviews were analysed according to key themes regarding the business case for LEADER, optimal operational conditions, the types of project best delivered by LEADER and experiences of wider learning, networking and exchange of best practice. Through the workshops, the combined findings from the secondary data, questionnaire and interview analysis were triangulated allowing future recommendations for local rural development approaches to be presented.

FINDINGS

The LEADER approach proved to be very popular among those involved in the process. In particular, our survey found that the local, bottom-up approach was highly valued although the level of bureaucracy and auditing was felt by many to be restrictive.

Table 1. What has LEADER done well? Survey responses.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree/disagree	Disagree/strongly disagree
Promoting networking & sharing best practice ¹	23%	47%	23%	8%
Helping make the area a better place ²	45%	45%	7%	3%
Taking a bottom-up approach ¹	42%	41%	11%	6%
Supporting innovation ²	36%	45%	11%	8%

¹ Data from 503 usable responses; ² Data from 506 usable responses

There were certain contentions between these findings and the experiences related through interviews where practical issues of implementation were not always so well-liked. For example, while some 80% of survey respondents felt that LEADER was good at supporting innovation through the funding of new projects, interviews with LAG officers highlighted a high degree of risk aversion. One asked “How do you balance risk with public funding?” add-



ing that “with strong monitoring and progress reporting people don't stray too far”. The fear of penalties in the event of projects not delivering was considered by many to be a restraint on more innovative projects. In one area, a portfolio investment approach meant that only one “risky” project would be supported at any given time, potentially restricting others from going ahead.

The issue of risk-taking and auditing highlights the tensions that will inevitably exist within such a governance system. During LEADER+, there was limited success across Europe in fostering evaluation capacity and local ownership of the monitoring and evaluation process (Metis GmbH, 2010); something that remains true in the English context with many evaluations commissioned externally. We also found that the mismatch between LAG boundaries and other statistical geographical units hampered wider evaluation approaches.

The recent LEADER period in England has shown the importance of local/non-local relationships as the regional layer of government was removed and macro-economic conditions changed dramatically. As LAGs and their officers became more familiar with the systems in place, greater local flexibility allowed funds to be diverted between measures to better suit local conditions and some LAGs were also able to work together to address shared needs. However, there was a feeling that the selection of measures against which projects could be funded, decided by RDAs at the outset, presented a top-down restriction that precluded true local control.

The launch of the current LEADER programme saw a large number of new LAGs created and spending on projects was often delayed as members became accustomed to the complex processes and procedures. Demanding workloads were also cited as a reason for limited take-up of networking opportunities, both nationally and internationally. The lack of international projects taken up by English LAGs was also influenced by an unwillingness to spend public funds on travel, especially at a time of financial austerity. Where it was successful, it relied on LAG members having a range of skills, including languages, to enable the cooperation to work well.

LEADER requires numerous resources in order to be effective at a local level and with 64 LAGs in England alone, the need to pool resources and knowledge becomes apparent. Links between actors with direct reporting or signatory roles have developed to provide additional guidance roles but there is undoubted scope for networks to be strengthened, both across LEADER groups and with organisations outside of LEADER. The latter point is particularly significant since many regional development reports were found to include no mention of LEADER and there is scant awareness among LEADER groups and LEPs of each others' roles.

THE FUTURE OF LEADER

The uncertainty around the structure, timescale, geographical inclusion and scale of the next LEADER programme is a genuine problem for many of Eng-

land's LAGs. Staff are being lost from the system due to the resultant insecurity and a significant hiatus between programmes may see a considerable loss of expertise. The added complication of the developing role of LEPs in England also raises questions regarding the future governance structure wherein LEADER will operate.

Not surprisingly, existing LEADER areas wished to retain their status but there was also a sense that coverage could usefully include market towns that served key functions for rural hinterlands. At present, some of these are intentionally excluded to meet the population threshold. Other rural areas were also excluded if their original Local Development Strategy was judged to be lacking in merit so these areas should be entitled to consideration in the future too, but a considerably larger geographical coverage will of course create certain challenges.

The research has found that efficiency savings could be made from combining back-office functions, without losing the focus on local issues. There was also a feeling that LAGs could benefit from a comprehensive set of good practice guidelines based on experience of the current programme which could especially help new LEADER groups. These might set out key principles they should follow in terms of the recruitment of members, the soliciting and consideration of bids, the conduct of meetings, contracting and monitoring, but with a clear emphasis on the value of local groups applying good practice to meet local circumstances, and not seeking to create top-down uniformity.

As the post 2014 situation becomes clearer, the range of reviews and evaluations being conducted should be collated to ensure that best practice is able to guide politicians and local actors alike in their pursuit of further economic and social development in Europe's rural areas. The experiences from England highlight difficulties in terms of managing risk, matching local opportunities to pre-defined measures and dealing with bureaucracy throughout the process. It also highlights real opportunities, however, as local actors have become increasingly capable at supporting applicants and developing approaches tailored to their local areas.

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