

# 14 Autonomy and LEADER

## A comparative study of three local action groups

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### Introduction

In this chapter we consider three case studies based on rural LEADER local action groups in relation to the question of autonomy. The case studies, based in three very different nations, Hungary, England, and Romania (Kovács and Nemes, 2019; Brooks et al., 2019; Zamfir, 2019), derive from a total of 33 carried out for the RELOCAL project, where case study research was a key method of enquiry. The case study method (Weck et al., 2018), which more broadly sought to investigate the impact of local-level actions and strategies on spatial justice, had among its key themes a particular focus on the question of autonomy.

LEADER is a European rural programme dating back to 1991 that aims to foster networked rural development – that is, local development based on local knowledge, needs and assets, but which also draws on external resources and connections, often across geographical levels, from neighbouring to national. A certain contradiction is implicit in the LEADER model: although notionally ‘bottom-up’, besides the horizontal ‘networked’ element, it has a significantly ‘top-down’, hierarchical dimension. Not only is it centrally steered and audited at the EU level, but national governments have a great measure of discretion in how the programme is implemented both institutionally and thematically, centralized (sometimes agricultural) payment agencies may distribute its funds to Local Action Groups (LAGS) and grant recipients, and local and district level authorities may take a hand in its day-to-day operations. From this may result a degree of mismatch between expectations of autonomy and the reality experienced on the ground. In this chapter we seek to uncover to what extent LEADER LAGs have autonomy and how constraints on autonomy may affect their outcomes (including spatial justice outcomes).

This question is explored through four main sections: the first presents a brief history of the LEADER programme since its inception in 1991, outlining its changing conceptualization, relationship to theories of rural development and the general features of its institutional implementation. In the

second section, the concepts of Autonomy and Spatial Justice are explored in the context of the LEADER approach, in order to develop a framework for analysing the autonomy of the case study actions, with a particular focus on a widely adopted definition of autonomy as powers of initiation and immunity and considering the role of participation and vernacular knowledge in local development.

There follow the two empirical sections of the paper, starting with the Findings, which begins by looking at the broader institutional and policy contexts for each compared LEADER programme at national levels, including the implications of later EU accession. This is succeeded by subsections on the autonomy themes of Participation, Powers of Initiation and Powers of Immunity, under each of which similarities and differences between the three case studies' implementations of the programme are explored. The fourth and final part, the Discussion and Conclusion, integrates the foregoing discussions of local autonomy and spatial justice at the theoretical level with the empirical evidence of the case studies, clarifying what degree of autonomy might be expected of a LEADER action, its impacts on spatial justice and the flaws in the programme design that make it vulnerable to co-option by more powerful players at local and higher levels.

### **LEADER, governance and rural development**

Historically, the governance of Europe's rural areas focused on their role in servicing towns and cities. Then, particularly in the post-war period, this crystallized into an approach known as 'exogenous rural development', whereby rural areas were developed and governed by external authorities in a top-down manner, which went hand-in-hand with a productivist attitude to rural industrial sectors, in particular food production.

By the early 1990s when the pilot LEADER community initiative was introduced, agricultural surpluses and environmental concerns had for some time shown the inadequacies of the exogenous, sectoral approach and led to calls for a broader, cross-sectoral form of rural development (Commission of the European Communities, 1988). 'Endogenous' approaches placed a new focus on area-based rural development, based on making the most of local resources through local participation. Within this context, LEADER represented a switch for the European Commission towards bottom-up, area-based rural development with a focus on capacity building (Black and Conway, 1996; Ray, 1998; MacKinnon, 2002; Scott, 2002; Woods, 2005). Key for this to work is that area-based local development, informed by local participation, also needs to be well-networked and integrated externally, securing the place of the dependent local area within wider power structures and external sources of support.

[N]etworked development involves not only deliberative governance and territorial place shaping, but also institutional capacity building,

engagement in relational networks and sharing of responsibilities with an enabling state and other actors . . . to secure their wider spaces of association in a networked world.

(Shucksmith et al., 2021: 326)

LEADER is supposed to be particularly designed to affect this kind of ‘neo-endogenous’, networked rural development, given the definitional principles and the broad structure that it has evolved through its various iterations since 1991. At the highest, EU level, LEADER evolved from an experimental phase, focused solely on deprived rural areas, and aimed at identifying and building on local economic strengths with the aim of reducing rural-urban disparities; to a greater focus on intra-regional equity, creating internal spatial justice through addressing the inclusion of marginalized groups (ENRD, 2016; Shucksmith et al., 2021). At an administrative level it has moved from being an independent, small-scale funding stream of £1.2 billion in LEADER I, shared between 217 schemes; to integration as a delivery option within a major EU funding programme (Pillar 2 of CAP), at a value of £9.8 billion, implemented by over 2,650 schemes as part of overall EU rural development policy (Atterton et al., 2020). It is the seven principles,<sup>1</sup> set out by European Commission, which make the LEADER approach adequate to bottom-up rural development for an enlarged Union.

While old member states were building up their experience in LEADER implementation, by the early 2000s the first wave of new member states from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) were joining the initiative. They encountered LEADER as a mature, no longer experimental policy (Augustyn and Nemes, 2014). A clash between the already mature conceptual apparatus of LEADER and the newly encountered social and institutional structures soon emerged, as particularly exemplified in the Romanian case study in the analysis below.

LEADER has both a horizontal, networked aspect and an aspect of vertical integration – in this sense it is both bottom-up and top-down. Shucksmith et al. (2021) argue that, while Local Development Strategies were negotiated with and approved by the European Commission in LEADER I, subsequently the scheme has become ever more subject to national and sub-national oversight and control (Ray, 1998; Hubbard and Gorton, 2011; Müller et al., 2020; Konečný et al., 2020, cited in Shucksmith et al., 2021: 323), a process of appropriation observed in numerous European case studies. This is one of the key dimensions along which our case studies were analysed and compared.

### **Autonomy and spatial justice in the context of the LEADER approach**

In this section we will problematize the degree of autonomy of LEADER local action groups (LAGs), and the ways in which this relates to two aspects

of spatial justice, procedural and distributive justice. In scrutinizing LEADER LAG autonomy, we adopt the approach of Ladner et al. (2015) as already adapted for the objectives of the RELOCAL project by Blondel and Evrard (2020) who made the first attempts to link the concept of autonomy to spatial justice. Following Ladner et al. (2015), Blondel and Evrard adopted the definition unaltered from Clark, who in his seminal article on the theory of local autonomy, identified two primary principles of local autonomy: the *power of initiation* and the *power of immunity* (Clark, 1984: 198). Initiation, according to Clark, means ‘*the actions of local governments in carrying out their rightful duties*’ whilst immunity expresses the ‘*powers of localities to act without fear of the oversight of higher tiers of the state*’. According to Clark, ‘*autonomy also defines the extent of local discretion in terms of local functions, actions, and legitimate behaviour*’ (Clark, 1984: 198).

What permits adapting a classification tailored to local governments for our purpose is that LAGs act, within the bounds of their remit, as the bottom layer of a multi-level governance system, in which authorities at the EU and national levels represent the top and intermediate tiers. In drawing this parallel we disregard the feature of LEADER whereby each Local Action Group defines its own territory and thus LEADER goes beyond ‘local’ and can be interpreted as ‘territorial’. However, it still represents a Local Administrative Unit (LAU) level according to the EU classification system.

Another contextual parallel that can be drawn between LEADER and local autonomy is decentralization induced by the so-called neoliberal turn of the last decades of the 20th century, which entails a reduced central state with competences devolved to lower levels as well as more collaborative governance. It was the OECD’s New Rural Paradigm (2006) that advocated a new approach in rural development based on three main factors, with decentralization and changed regional policies among them. The shift of focus pointed to the increasing importance of the local (focused on place, rather than sectors) and investments, rather than subsidies (OECD, 2006: 56–58). The LEADER Programme was highlighted in this OECD publication in appreciation of its integrated and endogenous approach to rural development and its multi-level governance model (OECD, 2006: 90–94).

The two notions of decentralization and local autonomy appear to be closely connected in a large body of the literature, for example, the central hypothesis of a recently published volume is that the ‘*degree of decentralization and the level of local autonomy correlates positively with the level of development*’ (Silva, 2020: 2). Concerning LEADER, Chardas (2017: 629) argues that its realization presupposes the existence of state apparatuses with decentralized competences and financial autonomy, which runs into problems in highly centralized states. Other commentators warn that decentralization does not always generate proportionate autonomy in the sense that it might enable local governments to deliver public policies that respond to the needs of their citizens. The capability of local governments to do so depends on the

extent to which the seven dimensions of local autonomy identified by Ladner et al. are within their disposal, that is: legal autonomy, political discretion, scope, financial autonomy, organizational autonomy, non-interference and access (Blondel and Evrard, 2020: 12).

It is not only neoliberal ideology that can induce decentralization of the central state, but historical events can also trigger radical decentralization too: this was the shared experience of several Eastern European countries at the time of the fall of state socialism, deriving from real political demand on the part of municipalities for democratic control and autonomy (Devas and Delay, 2006: 678). The process of Europeanization also played a pivotal role in the creation of more decentralized multi-level government structures in Eastern European Countries; Romania was cited as an example by Marquardt et al. (2012: 5) but, more generally, ‘regionalization’ of government was considered as an important condition for entering the EU across the region.<sup>2</sup> However, as the Hungarian case has illustrated after 2010, decentralization and even (a restricted) local autonomy might fade suddenly away as a consequence of a sharp political turn towards centralization (Pálné Kovács, 2020: 46). According to Ladner et al., Hungary has gained an outlier position among the European countries in the period 1990–2014 as the only one where local autonomy significantly decreased (Ladner et al., 2015: 60–78).

The LEADER Programme is not only decentralized but also collaborative and participatory, which brings it close to local governance issues. In the analysis of Michaels and de Graaf on citizen participation, three of its features are highlighted as factors enhancing democracy: its educative function (it can support citizens to increase their civic skills), its integrative function (it can contribute to citizens’ feeling of belonging of their community) and its role in establishing greater legitimacy of decisions; all of these functions are also pivotal in LEADER (Michaels and de Graaf, 2010: 480). The authors cite a paper in Dutch from 2010, to the effect that participatory policymaking is expected to ‘*narrow the gap between citizens and government, enlarges the problem-solving capacity and . . . improves the quality of policy*’ (Michaels and de Graaf, 2010: 482); these are dimensions frequently mentioned as positive attributes of the LEADER programme. Moreover, according to Devas and Delay, a greater stock of information on resources and their use gained through public participation helps to build the accountability of local government and the emergence of civic society actors ‘*capable of engaging effectively with local government . . . on behalf of the poor*’ (Devas and Delay, 2006: 484), thus contributing to increased social justice prevailing in the locality.

There are, however, counterarguments. Zamfir (2020) argues in his article on the Mara Natur case (Romania) that in the present context of intricate procedures and low funding levels, LEADER serves first and foremost as a pedagogical exercise in uneven development. In this vein, the newly inculcated civic skills are factors in furthering uneven development. Similar criticism by

Husu and Kumpulainen (2019) was raised in relation to the ‘creation of new moral actors’ as an outcome of aspirations in neoliberal policy to ‘empower’ local communities through (among other things) participation. The critical discourse around the neoliberal (Finnish) rural development paradigm argues that ‘*community development is not about transferring more power to local people, but rather about withdrawing government resources from communities*’ (Husu and Kumpulainen, 2019: 895). The authors’ critical judgement resonates with Peck and Tickell’s (2002) process-based analysis according to which through neoliberalization ‘*local institutions and actors were being given responsibility without power*’ (Peck and Tickell, 2002: 386). The concept that provides a chance of obviating the shortcomings of neoliberalization is Shucksmith’s ‘disintegrated rural development’. Shucksmith argues that the state can contribute to empowering local communities if it is capable of ‘*becoming a catalyst for local action, mobilising less powerful actors and becoming an agent for change*’, as the example of Scottish community-based land reform indicates (Shucksmith, 2010: 10).

Numerous less radical critiques of the impact of the LEADER Programme on local democracy diagnosed that the LEADER approach fails to reach vulnerable layers of rural communities. Those who are already well resourced, skilled and networked can access LEADER programmes and cope with the demands of the grant applications process, whereas lower-skilled, more isolated actors with less capital behind them may struggle to engage and if engaged, to win grants (Shucksmith, 2000: 13–15). Navarro et al. (2016: 272–273) adduce a long list of authors who found that the LEADER and/or endogenous development approach can reinforce existing power structures and marginalize the poor.

The latter article calls attention to the specificities of the Eastern European context owing to a weak presence of interest groups in rural areas in general, and civil society organizations in particular, as a legacy of the socialist past, aggravated by rural outflow, which had been triggered by transition from state socialism. Moreover, people’s lack of trust in the competencies of non-professional and non-statutory actors has enabled statutory actors, mayors and employees of local administration or governance frameworks such as micro-regional municipal associations to dominate rural development partnerships across the wider region. This was a common finding for Furmankiewicz et al. (2010) in the Polish context, Macken-Walsh and Curtin (2013) in the Lithuanian context and Marquardt et al. (2012) in the Romanian context. It should be added that the public sector dominance in LEADER LAGs and the strong influence of the power elite are not specific to the Eastern European context. Examples were reported from the Welsh and Spanish contexts as well (Esparcia et al., 2015: 33, 39; Navarro et al., 2016: 283). Looking at the operations of one LAG in Northern Italy and one in Eastern Finland, Rizzo (2013) concluded that local governance styles deeply influence how structures operate. While the Finnish case showed rural activists

to have played a major role in the foundation of the LAG, the Italian case exhibited characteristics of top-down approaches closely contained by the administrative governance bodies.

Development as a process and activity can be translated into the language of Clark as the powers of LEADER LAGs, *'to initiate'*, or in the words of Blondel and Evrard *'to accomplish tasks of local interest'* [our emphasis] (Blondel and Evrard, 2020: 8). Considering the criterion of autonomy and its conditions, self-determination of any local (or territorial) community is obviously related to resources, especially endogenous resources: we might assume that the more locally controlled resources are available for development in a given local community, the higher its level of autonomy. Ray uses the term *'development repertoire'* to refer to the means of endogenous development, implying *'a stock of resources or regularly used techniques'* a community might select from in the pursuit of local development objectives (Ray, 1999: 526). His concept envisages resources as both tangible and intangible, examples of the latter being local history, culture or local knowledge *'transformed into resources available for the territory'* (Ray, 1998: 9).

The concept of neo-endogenous development *'retains a bottom-up core . . . yet understands that extralocal factors . . . impact on – and are exploitable by – the local level'* (Ray, 2006: 281). Exploiting external factors implies increasing the resource base for local development, yet it does not automatically and immediately increase the level of local autonomy. However, depending on the kind and volume of external resources absorbed, internal resources can be impacted positively too, notwithstanding the fact that external resources embedding into the local context might soon become part of an extended endogenous *'development repertoire'* of the locality.

A parallel concept to neo-endogenous development, and indeed closely related to it in that there is a similar interplay between local and external, is so-called vernacular knowledge as a special form of hybrid expertise. Vernacular knowledge is regarded by Lowe et al. as *'place based but crucially nourished by outside sources and agents'* (Lowe et al., 2019: 28) generated *'through the joint production of knowledge, the creation of networks for expertise exchange, and helping equip local actors with methods and tools they can use to develop and apply their own expertise'* (2019: 36).

To conclude, neo-endogenous development and vernacular knowledge intertwine in the development process and contribute to the empowerment of the local community; they enhance local resources and thus strengthen local autonomy.

The degree of *'immunity'* according to Clark is the second criterion of local autonomy denoting the scale of interventions and control by donor and/or government agencies of the upper levels of government. Regarding the *immunity* of LEADER LAGs, which can be translated as the possibility *'to act, without oversight by higher levels for the local interest'* (Blondel and Evrard, 2020: 8) [our emphasis], the literature as well as our case studies provide

ample examples. The crudest and most direct state intervention regarding the implementation of the LEADER Programme was reported by Chardas as taking place in austerity-driven Greece, where dictated austerity measures related to governance reform. He presents a gradual recentralization of decision-making regarding local affairs in Greece, where austerity measures imposed by the Greek Government percolated down through a highly centralized and corruption-ridden state to local actors, affecting public institutions managing LEADER. LAGs of course suffered from severe cutbacks in public expenditure but, sadly, declining financial resources in Greece were also coupled with open political corruption, which completely undermined the organizational autonomy of the LAGs.

The political manipulation of the projects that are to be implemented is a constant feature of the project selection process in the LEADER programmes. All the mayors and elected members of regional councils are attempting to intervene and promote investment programmes of their political friends.

(Chardas, 2017: 630, 639)

What was essentially government intervention over LAG autonomy was reported by one of RELOCAL's case studies from the post-crisis United Kingdom. In this case local development strategies were overridden by the responsible government ministry, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), imposing a mandatory minimum limit (70%) of LEADER spending on job creation (Shucksmith et al., 2021: 10). This government action is less surprising if one takes into consideration the United Kingdom's poor reputation regarding the 'immunity' of local government bodies. According to Ladner et al.'s Self-Rule Index (2015: 47), the United Kingdom figured in the group of lowest-scoring countries with a value of 11.74, compared to which only Ireland scored worse among the EU's advanced capitalist countries (10.47). Of the 39 European countries reviewed, 29 were placed ahead of the United Kingdom and only 9 scored behind, including Albania, Georgia and Moldova.

Other accounts of the scope of autonomy of LEADER LAGs reflect either on mismanagement of the Programme at the national level, such as the frequent change of rules (Marquardt et al., 2012: 403), delays in starting the Programmes of which the Hungarian and England case studies also provide examples, or attest to inconveniences deriving from the reporting obligations and overwhelming bureaucracy (Cardenas Alonso and Nieto Maso, 2020; Chevalier et al., 2017; Oostindie and van Broekhuizen, 2010). Navarro et al. (2016: 280, 284) raise in their study the issue of the 'erosion of idealism' in LEADER that has been a growing feature of the subsequent programming periods, speeding up particularly since it has been mainstreamed in the 2007–2013 cycle.

The latter authors implemented a comparative survey among LAG managers in Wales and Andalusia which is highly relevant from the point of view of governance issues. Managers were asked among other things about their LAG's autonomy, indicating the level of decision-making autonomy on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high); the mean score was 3.8. They also gave positive evaluations of their LAG's impact on the enhancement of local decisions (4.1 mean score). In spite of such basically positive views, the most important attributes of LEADER LAGs and their democratizing impact was considered to be on the wane, and moving towards stronger integration with mainstream rural development policies, which resulted in deficiencies in many instances: '*LAGs have often been controlled by mayors and political representatives of the local and regional public sector, and this has resulted in the RDPs being used to promote political patronage, with political and economic leaders taking decisions over objectives*' (Navarro et al., 2016: 283) At this point the conclusion begins to consolidate that the Greek case described by Chardas may not be that far from the mainstream.

## **Findings**

The diversity of implementations of LEADER is widely acknowledged. The contextual drivers can be presented in a number of dimensions: one is related to the different geopolitical histories, particularly the situation of new versus old member states; the second relates to institutional background, that is centralized or decentralized state and multi-level governance structures; the third regards policy contexts. And finally, regarding LEADER, the territorial/local context must be underlined, as the crossroads where all the other dimensions meet and interact.

A comparison of the broader national contexts and their impacts on the implementation of the LEADER programme in the two most recent iterations is introduced in the first part of the section below. The second part features a discussion of the similarities and differences concerning the degree of autonomy and related issues revealed by the analysis of the three examined cases.

### *EU membership, multi-level governance, institutional environment*

Differences are apparent between the countries, as far as the institutional environment at the local level is concerned. These are partially related to multi-level governance structures and management patterns. In Hungary, the LEADER Programme has always been governed from the centre, in England implementation was still regionalized at the beginning of the 2007–2013 iteration, up to 2012, when the regional level in Northeast England was dissolved following a sharp political turn to the right at national level. The political turn in both countries paradoxically brought about similar changes

in multi-level governance: the beginning of significant recentralization by, among others, abolishing NUTS-2 regions (in Hungary LAU-1 micro-regions as well). In Romania, programme-level pursuit of LEADER was also centralized; nevertheless, county-level authorities (NUTS-3 level) remained influential actors playing an important role in sustaining LAGs through membership fees. In Hungary, county-level authorities are not involved with LEADER LAGs. Further differences of institutional environment for implementing the LEADER Programme can be illustrated by the UK example where local authorities have had administrative and supporting roles to play (host body, managing body) for LAGs. Such an institutionalized pattern of embedding LAGs into the realm (and services) of local authorities is unknown in both Hungary and Romania.

Continuing with the LEADER Programme as it matured through its successive phases, the advantage of the United Kingdom was immense at the beginning of the 2007–2013 cycle: the United Kingdom/England had taken part in all iterations of LEADER since its introduction in 1991. While Hungary only joined the European Union in 2004, a so-called experimental LEADER Programme was already launched there in 2001 by the Rural Development Department of the Ministry for Agricultural and Rural Development. This was followed by LEADER+ after EU accession in 2004, still as a pilot phase, but with the opportunity of learning and experimenting now provided for many more LAGs (70). It was with the 2007–2013 cycle that LEADER implementation in Hungary entered a more-or-less established phase. Unlike in the United Kingdom/England and later in Romania, Hungarian policymakers were self-confident enough to implement LEADER not only as a separate axis (Axis 4) of the Rural Development Programme (RDP) but also as a crosscutting instrument in the delivery of four of the six<sup>3</sup> measures of Axis 3. This is the period when the programme was extended to the entire country. In 2007, when preparations for the new programming cycle commenced in the other two countries, Romania had just joined the European Union. It thus implemented LEADER from scratch, with a three-year lag after Hungary, and no home-grown experimental phase.

### *The broader policy context*

The main goals to be achieved by the EU Rural Development Programme (RDP) were changed rather significantly in the 2014–2020 iteration. New priorities emerged, such as Priority 6<sup>4</sup> addressing poverty reduction, the most relevant from the point of view of our interest. A greater sensitivity towards social issues, however, mostly remained at the level of rhetoric rather than reality: because social inclusion was to be achieved as an overall impact of economic and ICT development, the scope of Local Development Strategies (LDS) did not show much difference from those of earlier iterations in either of the investigated cases. The new EU framework for rural policy provided more flexibility for national-level policymakers than before, which

was used to a different degree in member states. In Mansfeld-Südharz (East Germany), for example, 14% of the RDF was allocated to LEADER (Dax et al., 2016), whilst in the three countries under investigation, the allocation was limited to the mandatory minimum of 5% and the big innovation of the programming cycle, namely multi-funded CLLD, was not adopted either. The financial support of mono-funded LEADER significantly declined in the 2014–2020 period in Hungary and England; although not in Romania, which in 2014 entered its first full iteration. The largest reduction of LEADER-like rural development, to one-quarter of the support given in the previous iteration was experienced in Hungary, where the ordinary rural development measures were recentralized, and the poorly funded LEADER measure itself remained the sole measure implemented in a decentralized manner by LAGs.

### *The local context*

The size and territorial coverage of the LAGs are by and large similar in the three cases, representing areas with resident populations of 43,000 (Hungary), 55,000 (England) and 68,000 (Romania). It is characteristic of LEADER that the LAG catchment area will have been evolved specifically for the bid to the programme, and it may not have any other governance or administrative profile outside of the LAG action. Therefore, emerging shared identity is indicative of a successful community-building process implemented throughout the idiosyncratic LAG history.

It is probably not by chance that positive connotations concerning the LAG community and a definite, newly evolved common identity seem to be strongest in the Balaton Uplands case, where the LAG catchment area was built through a series of negotiations by the local actors in 2007. As far as territorial disparities are concerned, a rather significant gap between wealthy lakeside and disadvantaged ‘inland’ villages around Sümeg prevailed within the LAG area. Nevertheless, overall, it is an area rich in resources, with regard not only to its economic attributes (high touristic potential, vine growing, agglomeration zones) but also to its natural beauty, cultural heritage and human capital.

In England, the first NULAG catchment area was initiated by the regional development agency, One North East (ONE NE), in 2007, which separated the more prosperous and accessible coastal area of the former county-wide Northumberland LAG, from the remote uplands, which are dominated by low-income upland farms, forestry and military ranges, and with an economy characterized by SMEs and micro-businesses. ONE NE was also responsible for bringing together the team of uplands residents who were behind the first NULAG LDS, which represented the bid to central government for the LEADER grant. In its second and final period – it ended prematurely in 2020 due to Brexit – when it was hosted by the Local Authority, Northumberland County Council (NCC), this LAG expanded its boundaries to embrace

several peripheral market towns, raising the population to 55,000 and somewhat reducing the catchment's prior homogeneity in terms of socio-economic features and settlement patterns.

A different history is represented by the Romanian case of Mara-Natur, which covers three historical micro-regions and some of the member villages bordering the county capital of Baia Sprie. The driver of the initiative (and its current manager) was something of an outsider, a former public employee of Baia Sprie City Hall, who scoped out the programme through exploratory visits to LAGs in Hungary and Slovakia. What resulted was a LAG with a population of around 68,000, concentrated around two cities (Baia Sprie and Baia Mare). This area is characterized by a uniform profile of low incomes, especially in the villages outside the nearest neighbourhoods of the cities. Economic disadvantage is rooted in the area's former extraction economy, which abruptly halted almost 20 years ago, and has not been regenerated or replaced by new, emerging industries.

The comparison of the cases will continue in the sections below through three themes, closely related to the degree of autonomy: (i) participation, as a specific tool to garner local knowledge within the process of constructing an LDS, to recruit LAG members and grant applicants subsequently and (ii–iii) the powers of LAGs concerning initiation and immunity.

### *Participation*

The comparison of the three cases shows rather significant differences regarding *the participatory nature of the LDS process*: three years after EU accession, a great deal of enthusiasm for the programme still prevailed in Hungary, and thus participation was relatively unproblematic in general, and in the Balaton Uplands area in particular, where, as mentioned earlier, the LAG area was established through bottom-up negotiations, experience had been built up with LEADER+, and an extremely hardworking LAG Agency with three offices accessible by the population was established, staffed by people representing vernacular knowledge and different kinds of expertise. Participatory actions were part of mandatory procedures prescribed and controlled centrally, by a Ministry department playing the role of the Managing Authority (MA) indicating the co-existence of bottom-up and top-down elements in implementation of the programme.

The exemplary participatory actions led by the management in 2007 yielded a strategy, which was successfully implemented by 2015 and even beyond this, since the LAG continued to follow this LDS with few changes in Phase 2. It should also be noted that success was strongly influenced by external factors, such as the increasing value of the area's natural assets and its touristic potential as well as emerging consumer demand for quality food products. The most popular 'Quality Mark' project, which brought hundreds of new members to the LAG, was imported through an

international co-operation project that provided a framework, co-operation opportunity and a common background for entrepreneurs engaging in these interconnected branches (see video presentation by Kovács and Nemes, 2021).

In the NULAG case, participatory strategy building was hampered to some extent by the low number of personnel (2–3 full-time paid employees in Phase 1 and one person, supported by a dedicated administrator at the Local Authority in Phase 2) as well as the catchment's accessibility issues – the Northumberland Uplands is a very large, hilly territory of some 3,232 km<sup>2</sup> with some poor-quality internal road systems. It would be unlikely that the LAG's volunteer Board of Members and associated paid staff could be fully familiar with, and thus represent a balanced knowledge of, the catchment area. Furthermore, the initial catchment was extended in the 2014–2020 cycle and place identity was disturbed by amalgamations of local governments in 2009 and changes of electoral ward boundaries in 2013. On the other hand, largely due to the part-time retention of an exemplary Programme Officer between the penultimate and last LEADER phase in England, wide-reaching and in-depth consultation was undertaken during the development of the 2013–2020 Local Development Strategy.

The case of the Mara-Natur LAG seems to cover even more hindrances to participation. Unlike the resource-rich Hungarian LAG area, this is a region where people suffered significantly from the economic breakdown after the collapse of the communist regime. LEADER seemed somewhat out of step with the profile of the local economy (dominated by the remainders of extraction industry), and the volume of LEADER grants was regarded as disproportionately meagre, by comparison with the level of investment needed for sound economic regeneration of the region. Additionally, the programme was largely unfamiliar to stakeholders, and moreover, initiated externally, leading to scant interest and enthusiasm in 2009, when the LAG was established. Because of the very strict control of the MA and PA, imposing fines where projects failed to meet criteria or expectations, and frequent legislative changes (similar to both the England and Hungary cases), the LAG management was uncertain who should be encouraged to participate in the Programme, and how this should be effected. Accessibility issues also emerged in this case, arising from the fact that LAG meetings were generally held in town locations, making attendance too costly and time consuming for many villagers and remote rural dwellers. In this local (societal) context, the management had to work 'bureaucratically' to ensure that the programme implementation ran smoothly.

Ultimately, the aforesaid circumstances, coupled with the reduced relevance of actual place knowledge when confronted with available funding opportunities, resulted in doubts concerning LEADER as an adequate tool of development. A reduction in grant, affecting the proportion allocated to outreach and animation in the most recent iteration hampered participation in

the cases of both Northumberland and Balaton Uplands, less so in the Mara Natur case where an agency with seven paid staff operated in the 2014–2020 programming cycle (cf. the one-to-two of the NULAG case and the three of the Balaton Uplands). In all three cases it is probably true to say that the bureaucratic and complex nature of the application procedure, alongside the diminishing availability of match funding or bank loans to cover pre-financing of the awarded project grants, placed limits to the inclusion of lower-skilled and low-capitalized actors in the actions.

### *Powers of initiation*

If *power of initiation* is interpreted after Clark as ‘*the actions of [LAGS] in carrying out their rightful duties*’, the notion of initiation in case of the LEADER Programme covers the entire duration of the programme cycle at the local level, and it intertwines with participation from the appraisal phase of the LDS onwards. This is the phase when overall development targets are set up, local knowledge is channelled and built into priorities and measures. Depth of local knowledge is to some extent a corollary of the extent of local participation as described in the previous section, as it impacts the quality of the LDS data, which not only provides a firm and place-shaped foundation to creating priorities for the LDS, but also helps implement the strategy through the established contacts. Powers of initiation for Local Action Groups under such broader interpretation mainly depend on three factors: (i) the LDS process; (ii) the resources available; and (iii) the capabilities of the potential applicants.

Regarding the LDS process, the participative nature of the strategy-building and grant application process has been detailed earlier. Concerning resources – the amount of money available for animation and project development – in both the England and Hungary cases this declined in between the first and second iterations as mentioned earlier. In Romania the issue of shrinking resources does not apply, as there was more money allocated for the second iteration, which covered the entire LEADER programme cycle for the first time.

Regarding the capabilities of potential applicants, this applies mainly to Romania, where rural actors’ limited capacities in terms of responding to calls for applications relating to social services and biodiversity, set a limit on the powers of initiation of the LAG that it may not have been able to foresee – and that probably relates to the lower level of development of civil society in the post-communist context. In NULAG’s second iteration, there was likewise only one successful application in one of the six categories set by central government, ‘Culture and Heritage’, but this may be because of difficulty of fitting projects to the centrally imposed restrictions as noted earlier. In the Balaton Uplands case, the measure aiming to revitalize the ‘Smart hiking trails’ failed due to similar capacity shortages.

*Powers of immunity*

Freedom of LAGS from oversight and interference from higher governance levels, called *immunity* by Ladner et al. (2015) after Clark (1984), depends on several factors, listed below, of which two are highlighted in more detail:

- Vulnerability of LEADER LAGS to direct intervention from above. Immunity means independence of the Local Development Strategy and the extent to which it is under the control of each LAG and its associated local assemblies (in the case of Romania and Hungary) or under the influence of the voluntary LAG Board of Members, in the case of England. Independence in developing the LDS was in the power of the LDS in all the cases but one, which took place in the second iteration of NULAG, when, it fell under the control of central government, who overruled the existing LAG-defined LDS and restricted the eligible types of projects and funding, in line with government measures to combat the financial crisis, thus overriding the LDSs of all England LAGs;
- Degree of bureaucracy in the scheme administration imposed by the multiple levels of governance of the LEADER Programme, from the EU, down to national, regional and local government levels.
  - For immunity (as well as for initiation), a critical factor is the level of bureaucratic, as opposed to financial control, exercised by all levels of government – from the design of the application process (complexity, timing, flexibility, etc.) and eligibility criteria, to numbers and types of changes and how they are communicated, to which governance level takes on the role of setting these rules;
  - whether guides, handbooks and other aspects of the application procedure are produced in a timely manner or with delays; whether guidance remains constant or is continually altered during each five-year programme;
  - and finally, can the LAG develop and implement its own projects alongside giving out grants to applicants – this latter was possible in Phase 1 NULAG and was particularly used to develop a flourishing international exchange programme; it was also a valued component of Phase 1 in both Balaton Uplands and Mara Natur programmes.

As commonalities it was revealed that all three cases were subjected to long delays (between one and four years) in implementation due to deficiencies in the administrative capacity of (or between) higher levels; all cases also experienced delays in MA (Managing Body in the England case) decisions, the issuance of guidance or electronic tools/platforms for uploading applications, and so on.

Other contextual factors:

- *the policy context*: this aspect covers the extent to which the aims of the LEADER programme are mirrored and supported by the policies of the national and local governments; this was broadly the case at the beginning of NULAG and the Balaton Uplands but had declined considerably during successive governments from 2010 onwards, which was in part a response to austerity but in part also ideological in both countries;
- *the context of government*: meaning the degree of local autonomy in the national context and of central government control generally (in the United Kingdom/England this is very low and in Hungary it has declined greatly since 2012, but it was at a reasonable level in Romania);
- *the procedural context*:
  - *guarantees of (or lack of) fair procedures*: stability and continuity in staffing and maintenance of responsive contact with the LAG from higher government levels – in England this was affected by austerity staffing cuts to various governance bodies, in Hungary the ‘iteration gap’ financial crisis eroded the quality of communications and trust.
  - *guarantees of (or lack of) the independence of national and/or local government from influence by special interests and lobby groups, such as agriculture and business*;
  - *legal guarantees (or lack of) to contest or otherwise appeal government body decisions at any level*. Such guarantees have been available in both iterations in the three investigated countries.

## Discussion and conclusion

The comparison of three case studies on LEADER actions implemented in England, Hungary and Romania revealed that the way the LEADER Programme is implemented is highly dependent on the national and local contexts. This is also the case for the LAGs’ level of autonomy. Several contextual drivers have been presented in the above sections such as the background of the institutions that frame the adoption of the Programme, centralized or decentralized state structures, policy contexts and broader geopolitical histories, legacies of former political regimes hampering or nourishing the participation of the targeted population in the process of development.

LEADER is usually implemented as a measure on its own aimed at generating and realizing strategies through accomplishing several place-based and community-based projects, which play the role of localizing development. In some instances, it works as a delivery mechanism of devolved rural development measures as happened in the Hungarian case in the 2007–2013 cycle. Place-based and community-based projects should be the outcomes of participatory actions accomplished as the most important attributes of

the LEADER approach from the start to the end of a LEADER Programme and contribute indirectly – through community empowerment – to enhancing LAG autonomy. As we illustrated in the previous section, a great number of conditions influence the flow and outcome of participatory actions from the social, psychological and financial disposition of the recipient community through to the resourcefulness of the area (economic resources, human capital to managerial skills; availability of various kinds of expertise) enabling or hindering a successful infusion of local knowledge into the development process. These conditions are determined by national-level procedural rules (prescription and control of participation), legacies of the past as well as by various aspects of accessibility, including physical (distances, transport infrastructure), financial (affordability of travel, the number of personnel) and procedural (central or territorially dispersed locations of organized participatory actions).

Power of initiation constitutes local autonomy in conjunction with what was termed by Ladner et al. (2015) after Clark (1984) ‘*power of immunity*’, which translates as the ‘freedom of the LAG’ from intervention from above. LEADER as a policy tool, which is implemented in a decentralized manner, operates necessarily within a hierarchical institutional framework, which generates procedures and exercises control. Two of our investigated LAGs were autonomous enough to create and implement their LDS within certain parameters set by the RDP and the managing institutional environment, one was (latterly) not. However, if extended bureaucracy is coupled by mismanagement at the upper levels of government, the execution of an LDS can be seriously threatened – for example, if the tendering or approving processes are delayed or certain measures are not tendered, or they are tendered too late, which was typically the case with the domestic and international cooperation projects. Furthermore, financing the management during the inter-programme periods has always and everywhere created serious problems. In spite of some limited attempts to tackle this (e.g., in the England LEADER programme), it still does not seem to be resolved.

Paradoxically, according to the result of the comparison of autonomy levels of the investigated cases, NULAG proved to be the least autonomous and Balaton Uplands seemed to operate as the most autonomous LAG. This outcome is due to not only the unprecedented intervention by the ministerial level of administration to LAG matters in the second phase of NULAG, but also the institutional environment. LEADER implementation in this country is embedded in local institutions whose behaviour might be Janus-faced, providing services and capacities on the one hand, but trying to influence LAG matters on the other. The latter happened, when the host body (National Park) and the Local Authority both attempted to commandeer the LEADER programme for their own institutional ends towards the end of Phase 1. Similar attempts have been reported by the Mara Natur case, where the county council is a member of the LAG, helps it in a number of ways, but also attempted to co-opt (so far unsuccessfully) its managing agency. The

Balaton Uplands LAG has operated independently of any upper-level local authorities; it is extremely vulnerable to national-level policy decisions and the shrinking financial endowment of the LEADER Programme; it has suffered a major drop in funding and lengthy delays in implementation; but its autonomy has not been disturbed otherwise than by procedural issues.

LEADER is a programme which makes available small grants for rural actors and thus its direct impact on spatial injustice is necessarily limited. However, if the distributional aspect of LEADER, linked to development, is considered, the aim of contributing to a more just territorial distribution of resources represented a specific focus in two of the three case studies (NULAG and Balaton Uplands). In addition to territorial targets, social targets were clear in the NULAG case in the first iteration and in the Balaton Uplands LAG in the second, both having a particular focus on rural youth. The most vulnerable social and minority groups were not addressed in any of the investigated LDSs, which is understandable, if we consider the programme-level thematic agendas of LEADER in the two most recent iterations. If small-scale entrepreneurship, rural tourism and networking of these actors are addressed, for example, in case of the Balaton Uplands LAG, it is necessarily the small business-owning class which gains most benefit from the Programme. This is, however, a legitimate and adequate purpose of rural development, especially in the context of post-state socialism. This fact does not detract from the failure of LEADER to consider how systems of governance and dimensions of power may act to the benefit of existing powerholders, emerging repeatedly in the literature (Commins and Keane, 1994). Those who are already well-resourced, skilled and networked can access LEADER programmes and cope with the demands of the grant applications process, whereas lower-skilled, more isolated actors with less capital behind them may struggle to engage and if engaged, to win grants (Shucksmith, 2000: 213–215).

LEADER has been interpreted through diverse discourses. According to critical social scientists quoted earlier, for example, LEADER might work in favour of uneven development and has been shaped by the neoliberalization that was a prevailing trend at the time of its origins in the early 1990s. It is seen by the latter discourses as scaling down responsibility to local levels without providing these lower government levels with financial autonomy and power. Governing approaches and epochal trends are of course always influential but empirical evidence suggests that the concrete drivers of decentralization differ by macro-region in Europe. The allocation or withdrawal of resources can be triggered by different contexts as well. In the former state socialist countries, and in Hungary specifically, decentralization of state administration was a reaction to the failing, over-centralized socialist state structures, rather than a manifestation of neoliberalization, and withdrawal of the already meagre development resources from the local level in 2009 was a desperate step enforced by the critical financial status of the heavily

indebted country in the context of the global financial crisis. The fact that these normative funds have never returned to the local level has been in line with recentralization (Ladner et al., 2016), the opposite trend to neoliberalization and decrease in local autonomy to an extreme degree during the Orbán governments since 2010.

As has been mentioned in several contexts in this paper, the financial endowment of the LEADER Programme in most EU member states remains at the mandatory minimum level of 5% of the RDP, resulting in modest levels of funding for the individual LAGs. This is the primary condition which sets limitations in terms of both power and responsibility of LAGs over the scale of impact on local development they might achieve. Considering this, high expectations of sound, area-related development must exceed the realities. What can be expected, however, is niche-based, unique and place-shaped development, explored through participatory actions and integrated local knowledge thus complementing the funding repertoire available in rural areas and transmitting resources to those stakeholders for whom other funding instruments are not available, which was achieved by NULAG and Balaton Uplands in Phase 1 implementation; the Mara Natur LAG also has attempted to go in that direction.

Our case studies show both the ‘light and shadow’ potentials in LEADER. They uncover several common features as well as differences driven by deviations regarding maturity, institutional contexts and preparedness. They also echo the findings of earlier studies to highlight the programme’s design flaws that make it vulnerable to co-option by the most powerful players in rural development, be they ‘the usual suspects’ of privileged places and players in the local area, or local and even national authorities.

Faced with their own economic and reputational pressures, private and public sector players may not only target the programme’s modest resources, but, just as importantly, seek to claim credit for the hard-won rural innovations born, at least in part, of LEADER’s promise of autonomy. In some of the cases we have discussed in this chapter, the local legacy of LEADER may lie as much in the experience of such contradictions as in its local development achievements.

## Notes

- 1 Area-based local development strategies; bottom-up elaboration and implementation of strategies; local public-private partnerships, local action groups; integrated and multi-sectoral actions; innovation; co-operation; networking (European Commission [EC], 2006).
- 2 In Hungary, for example, seven NUTS-2 regions were set up by the Millennium. They provided the institutional framework for regional development programming up until 2012, when the NUTS-2 tier was abolished from the multi-level government system. Since then, the regional tier has been represented by counties (NUTS-3 level), of which 19 are operating.

- 3 The four measures delivered in a devolved manner were: Village renewal, Cultural heritage, Developing micro-enterprises, Rural tourism. Two measures (Village buses, Integrated Rural Centres) were put to a centrally steered tender process.
- 4 Priority 6 of the RDP aimed at 'Promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction via development of small enterprises and job creation, local development, enhanced accessibility and use of ITC'.

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