



CO-OPERATION BETWEEN RURAL AREAS: LEADER AND EXTRA-LEADER PROJECTS OF ITALIAN LAGS



MINISTERO DELLE POLITICHE AGRICOLE
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Cooperazione
tra aree rurali

Co-operation between rural areas: Leader and extra-Leader projects of Italian Lags

This volume, which shows the results of a study about territorial cooperation of Local Action Groups, has been carried out by INEA – in collaboration with the company Contesti within the activities of the National Rural Network.

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INTRODUCTION	6
1. TERRITORIAL COOPERATION IN EU POLICIES: COMPARISON OF THE LEADER APPROACH	9
1.1. THE INSPIRING PRINCIPLES OF TERRITORIAL COOPERATION IN EUROPEAN POLICIES	9
1.2. TERRITORIAL COOPERATION IN LEADER APPROACH	10
1.2.1. <i>Territorial cooperation in Leader I and II</i>	10
1.2.2. <i>Territorial Cooperation in Leader+</i>	12
1.2.3. <i>Territorial cooperation in Rural Development Plans</i>	15
1.3. COOPERATION PROJECTS UNDER THE DIFFERENT EDITIONS OF LEADER: COMPARING PARTICIPATION, FINANCIAL RESOURCES AND AREAS OF INTERVENTION	17
1.3.1. <i>Participation</i>	17
1.3.2. <i>Financial Resources</i>	19
1.3.3. <i>Areas of Intervention</i>	20
1.4. LEADER COOPERATION EXPERIENCE TOWARD OTHER TERRITORIAL COOPERATION PROGRAMMES: SEEN AS ADDED VALUE	28
2. LAGS AND TERRITORIAL COOPERATION PROJECTS: SURVEY RESULTS	31
2.1. THE OBJECTIVES OF THE SURVEY AND THE METHODOLOGY	31
2.1.1. <i>The desk analysis</i>	32
2.1.2. <i>The field analysis</i>	33
2.1.3. <i>The numbers of the survey</i>	34
2.2. THE TRANSNATIONAL DIMENSION OF COOPERATION	36
2.3. LEADER COOPERATION	39
2.3.1. <i>The numbers of cooperation and thematic areas of LEADER projects</i>	39
2.3.2. <i>The index of “dynamism” in Leader projects</i>	40
2.3.3. <i>The analysis of LEADER projects at regional level</i>	43
2.4. EXTRA-LEADER COOPERATION	48
2.4.1. <i>The numbers of extra-Leader cooperation projects and their themes</i>	48
2.4.2. <i>The index of “dynamism” in Extra-Leader cooperation projects</i>	49
2.4.3. <i>The analysis of extra-Leader projects at regional level</i>	50
2.5. INDICATORS AND INDEX OF TERRITORIAL COOPERATION	53
2.5.1. <i>Methodology</i>	53
2.5.2. <i>The most dynamic LAGs</i>	54
2.5.3. <i>Analysis of the placement</i>	58
2.6. RESULTS, DIFFICULTIES AND LESSONS LEARNED: SOME OF THE LAGS CONSIDERATIONS	63

2.6.1. <i>Main results</i>	63
2.6.2. <i>Critical issues</i>	65
2.6.3. <i>Lessons Learned</i>	67
3. LEADER COOPERATION POST 2013: BETWEEN EXPECTATIONS AND UNCERTAINTIES	69
3.1. SCENARIO POST 2013: IMPLICATIONS	69
3.2. THE MAIN INNOVATIONS IN THE POST-2013 PROGRAMMING PHASE IN TERMS OF TERRITORIAL COOPERATION AND LEADER	71
3.3. THE MAIN PROBLEMS TO BE SOLVED	74
Acronyms	77
References	78

Introduction

This Volume contains the initial results of a piece of research that INEA is carrying on among the National Rural Network activities in cooperation with the company Contesti. This research is aiming at detecting and discussing the main trends/dynamics of cooperation adopted by the Local Action Groups (LAG/groups) during the planning and implementation phase of their interventions. This research was meant with the aim to provide a comprehensive view of the experience that LAGs have made within the territorial cooperation framework during the various programming phases of EU Funds considering cooperation with a wider and more important role than that of the Leader approach.

The involvement of LAGs in extra-Leader cooperation projects has already been recognized in the field of rural development. However what was missing so far was the assessment of this phenomenon – how many cooperation projects have been started and fulfilled? Which issues have they focused on? Which Community programmes have they been funded by? What are the main effects on the territories involved? Have these projects got a synergistic relationship with local development plans? Bridging this information gap was the very aim of this study thus giving greater visibility and prominence to the experience made by LAGs and their territories.

The need to quantify what included inside the universe of cooperation projects (Leader and extra-Leader) that revolve around the LAGs, has then represented the starting point of the study. While basic information was available for Leader cooperation projects (i.e. databases processed and recorded by INEA in the various editions of the National Rural Network), a survey was conducted in the field in order to collect information and data on extra-Leader ones in 2012. In particular the survey was carried out by submitting a research questionnaire to the 129 LAGs selected during the on-going programming phase (2007-2013). Furthermore the survey was complemented by the analysis of portals and web pages of the same LAGs. The number of LAGs that sent back the questionnaire was 136 (more than 70% of the questioned subjects). The information gathered at this early stage was integrated with that later recovered from databanks on cooperation as well as with the existing literature on this subject (records, projects, case studies etc.). The latter sources made it possible to recover data on extra-Leader cooperation projects not only carried out by those LAGs that, even if contacted, didn't return the questionnaire, but also by those that operated in the earlier programming and no longer active in the current one. We counted 331 cooperation projects in total, 95 of which related to the extra- Leader environment.

The information collected, as well as its analysis, form the subject of this Volume whose content was divided into three parts.

The first part describes the development of cooperation a tool within the EU policies. A huge part is dedicated to the role played by cooperation in the Leader approach. The research considers its guiding principles, its characteristic features, all the novelties marking its passage from a programming phase to another as well as the effects they had on the implementation of this tool. This analysis makes it clear that since the Leader outset, LAGs have always considered cooperation as a prime opportunity to reinforce their strategies. This is demonstrated by the fact that the inclusion of cooperation among Leader project guidelines was spontaneous thanks to the experimentation started by some of the Groups during the first implementation phase of the Leader approach (1991-1994).

The European Commission should be given the credit for grasping the innovative drive coming from the local actors (LAGs), by including the cooperation tool in the regulation and financial framework of Leader since its second edition. In the Chapter 2 a comparative presentation of the “numbers” of cooperation in Leader is provided, as well as the thematic areas involved in the light of the different programming phases that have followed so far. The relationship between Leader cooperation and other forms of territorial cooperation with its synergies and differences is the object of study in the last paragraph. Here the main reasons that lead LAGs to participate in extra-Leader cooperation projects are synthetically illustrated, like for example the desire to expand their sphere of intervention or the need to respond to requests from local institutions. In any case for most of them their participation turned out to be a good opportunity to consolidate their skills in the management of the several “*cooperation dossiers*” thus reinforcing their role as local agencies.

Having managed cooperation projects in a programme such as the Leader gave LAGs an edge both in terms of project management (as we know the EAFRD rules are far more complex than those that regulate all the other Funds) and methodological approach. As far as the latter is concerned, it must be said that the important innovation characterizing the Leader approach (endogenous, participative and sustainable interventions) was extended to the interventions co-financed by other cooperation programmes promoting their integration in local development processes. Moreover, the close connection between the Leader cooperation actions and local development strategies represents one of the most peculiar features of the Leader experience.

The analysis of LAGs tendency towards territorial cooperation within the Leader and extra-Leader environments represents the core of the second part of the work. It contains the main findings emerging from the conducted survey. Its approach is in itself innovative as the level of participation of the LAGs in the planning and implementation of cooperation projects during different programming phases was measured by means of three *ad hoc* indicators: indicator of project planning, indicator of quality, and indicator of involvement. Their use has allowed us to provide a vision of synthesis that would make it possible, in a logic of benchmarking, to identify the elements that characterize the approach of the LAG towards cooperation. Subsequently, these indicators, through the adoption of specific statistical methods, were included in the cooperation index, a summary measure defined to create a scale of comparison between the LAGs and to highlight the best performing groups. Our aim, however, was not just the creation of a “ranking” of the LAGs, but provide information on their position regarding the examined themes in the specific period (2000-2012), in order to draw reflections aiming at improving the current state, especially in view of the opportunities in the post-2013 programming cycle.

The second part of the Volume closes with the processing of the information coming from the third part of the questionnaire used in the “*field*” survey and aimed at revealing the key results from the cooperation projects, as well as the problems that emerged during the planning and operational phases and what was learned during their implementation. The reported considerations derive from the direct words of the protagonists and make it possible to seize, if only in a synthetic way, the positive and negative aspects that characterized the experience of cooperation and, directly and indirectly, influenced the *governance* process of the projects. The second phase of the research that INEA is going to conduct on the theme of LAG cooperation, was inspired by these very first considerations and it is aimed at thoroughly investigating the cooperation experience of LAGs through the analysis of some case studies. Such study is expected to be completed in 2014.

The third and final chapter focuses on the most important novelties inside the post-2013 EU programming phase for territorial cooperation. Starting from the main problems faced so far in the Leader cooperation, we tried to highlight some of the measures that could be taken to prevent them in the future. At the same time, starting from the future structure of the programming – that is in itself quite complex – an attempt was made to analyse the potential LAG areas in terms of cooperation including the extra-Leader one. Thanks to the very many experiences they made, as main actors, in the field of cooperation over the last two decades, many LAGs can now boast of such an expertise that they could manage “cooperation dossiers” at their best no matter what kind of Community support programme. Certainly the analysis we performed shows some weaknesses in the work of the LAGs, in part due to factors related to the inconsistent management of some of them. But what strongly emerges and that, to some extent, exacerbates the weaknesses of local contexts, is the lack of flexibility of the bureaucratic-institutional structures put in place to govern the processes of territorial development, including cooperation. The rules, the procedures, and the structures adopted so far are not very suitable for understanding the complexity that lies behind a cooperation project. Cooperation would require a greater investment in skills and dedicated structures according to a strategic logic where it is not only meant as the sum of several projects and, above all, it is enclosed into a planned and systematic strategic plan. This would allow a better focus on the common objectives which, according to common knowledge, are the real added value of cooperation actions.

1. TERRITORIAL COOPERATION IN EU POLICIES: COMPARISON OF THE LEADER APPROACH

1.1. The inspiring principles of territorial cooperation in European policies

The European territorial cooperation finds its *raison d'être* in art. 174 of the European Treaty (former art.158 TEC), stating that: *"In order to promote its overall harmonious development, the Union shall develop and pursue its actions aiming at the strengthening of its economic, social and territorial cohesion"*. Thus territorial cohesion – alongside the economic and social ones– represents one of the three components of cohesion policy. Approaching local territories and realities, it consistently relates to the principles of local development, reinforcing the idea that cooperation among several local systems could represent one of the cornerstones of territorial policies, such as those co-financed by the Structural Funds.

The added value of cohesion, if we compare it to other programming tools, is the fact that its goals and achievements result from group relational processes, otherwise defined as 'partnership'. Its adoption implies the willingness to overcome utilitarian behaviour, going beyond individual competencies; to take on organizational rules and procedures consistent with the complexity of decisions; to accept shared responsibility bearing the related risks; to create opportunities for discussion, meeting with the different territorial institutions in order to jointly find the optimal solution.

Challenges, difficulties, changes but also growth as well as economic, cultural and social openness marked the landscape of territorial cooperation during the various programming stages of the Community's cohesion policies. What should be highlighted is the way it assumed an increasingly significant role within the EU strategies, both in terms of dedicated programmes and allocated financial resources – a role that made it act as a third pillar of European cohesion policy in the 2007-2013 period¹.

Territorial cooperation finds its higher expression in the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) which was introduced for the first time in 1989 as a Community initiative named INTERREG and with the start-up of the first Reform of Structural Funds and confirmed in the following Reforms². Its aim is to *"improve cooperation at cross-border, transnational and interregional levels in the sectors concerning urban, rural and coastal development as well as the development of economic relations and the networking of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)"*.

Over the years, other programmes came up beside INTERREG differing from it for their

1 The other two are: *"Convergence"* and *"Regional competitiveness and employment"*.

2 During that first phase, in which INTERREG was assisted by two other C.I. at transnational level (REGEN and REGIS), the first trials on new methods and approaches to overcome the national barriers to enhance the territorial economic development. To this purpose, projects to enhance the mobility throw the different States were carried out in order to share know-how, to better the management of natural resources and the quality of life of the populations involved in the various programmes. For further information on this first phase relate to C. Zumpano (2000).

geo-political areas of interest, or programmes that, though not considering cooperation as an end in itself, foresaw its activation within themselves. We could cite some example like Equal that, during the 2000-2006 phase encouraged the exchange of good practices in the field of social and human capitals, and Leader that has been operating since 1989 in the rural development field. The Leader, and specifically the role played within it by co-operation, is the focus of study in this chapter.

1.2. Territorial cooperation in Leader approach

The construction of a united and cohesive Europe able to develop and implement European solutions and common issues among Member States, relies on the capability to perform co-operational actions with people, organizations and institutions of the several Union states. Territorial cooperation is therefore a key element of EU policies that materializes mainly in dedicated programmes but that also finds its role inside structural policies including those addressed to rural areas. As for the latter, reference is made to Leader approach in which territorial cooperation is not an end in itself but a tool to consolidate local development pathways.

1.2.1. Territorial cooperation in Leader I and II

Since the very beginning of the Leader, territorial cooperation was seen by the Local Action Groups (LAGs / groups) as an opportunity to deal with. In fact, although the Leader I (1991-1994) did not envisage a specific support for territorial cooperation³, some LAGs (49 out of the 217 selected), taking advantage of the opportunities for meeting offered by the European Observatory Leader (European seminars, thematic workshops), gave life to several experiences of cooperation with groups of other Member States. At this early stage, it represented a true “*field trial*” of the instrument cooperation, in which not only LAGs, but also local authorities took part – including some Managing Authorities – and in some cases, also took charge of the financial support of the envisaged actions.

As it was an investigational phase, born spontaneously and from the grassroots, the undertaken 17 cooperation projects had a soft and informal dimension, they had no legal entity designed to encourage the exchange of experience and the innovation transfer in thematic areas that were mainly characterizing the Local Action Plans (LAPs) i.e. rural tourism support and promotion of local products⁴.

The spontaneous start of transnational cooperation projects by the LAGs of Leader I pushed the European Commission to bet on this instrument, in the programming phase 1994-1999, dedicating to it a specific measure – the measure c) of the Leader II. Its purpose – as stated in Article 13 of the Notice to the Member States – was to develop an active solidarity among European rural areas benefiting from the Initiative through “*the development,*

3 This made the C.I. Leader different from other Community initiatives (e.g. Interreg, New Horizon, etc.). Leader had to be mainly a programme to enhance local development, implemented within a given territory and could not be “*complicated*” by the introduction of a clearly transnational dimension.

4 For further details on this phase see the study conducted by the Leader/AEIDL Activation Unit, whose main results are showed in Moseley M., “*Starting transnational cooperation: the Leader I experience*”, AEIDL, Brussels October 1994.

*implementation and joint marketing of products and services in all fields of rural development*⁵. Thus cooperation was meant as an added tool to reinforce local action, giving to it an international importance. Its added value had to originate from the sharing of knowledge, from the creation of a common patrimony of resources, from the generation of a critical mass of good practices for policies, as well as from the introduction of innovative elements both in the design and coordination phases.

Given the complexity of cooperation projects, as well as their strengthening function of actions at local level, their insertion in the regulatory context of the Leader approach was not considered compulsory for LAGs and nor will it be in the future editions of the approach. At the same time, in order to support the Groups that wanted to be engaged in this field, inside its programming conditions the Leader approach foresaw specific instruments and mechanisms to help the promoters and participants in the projects to overcome the difficulties, especially the initial ones. This kind of support was maintained also in the following Leader editions. However it is important to highlight the active role that the European Commission had at this stage envisaging a direct financial and technical assistance to support LAGs during the early planning stages of the projects. Such a support was committed to the *Leader European Observatory* and 4 million euros were allocated envisaging a € 25,000 grant for each project, € 5,000 of which represented a contribution to support the phase “*from the idea to the project*” (i.e. the introductory meetings of partners) and € 20,000 for the following phase “*from the project to action*” (i.e. feasibility check of the common idea and the subsequent execution of the project). The contribution provided a coverage of 100% of incurred expenditure⁶. Then the LAGs could submit the developed project proposals to the Managing Authorities to obtain the financing using the measure c) of the Regional Leader Programmes (RLP) or of the National ones – this measure was specifically devoted to cooperation and could count on approximately 140 million euros. Ample freedom of access to support actions was given to LAGs – they could activate both of them or just ask for the activation of one, or even could skip these two support phases and had direct access to the resources of the measure c) submitting an already enforceable project.

The Commission active role in promoting cooperation projects was expressed by the actions of its operational instrument – the European Observatory Leader–designed to encourage the exchange and sharing of cooperation visions. Furthermore, a database of all cooperation ads was made up, methodological records were disseminated on how to start and implement good cooperation projects, four workshops were organized dedicated to international cooperation (in Spain, Greece, Germany and Portugal) which represented not only a chance to “learn” methods and practices to be adopted, but also to “meet” and discuss submitted ideas. The Observatory actions found a sounding board at national level through the support actions undertaken by the Leader National Networks. Although not “formally” provided and in concert with the Observatory, the national Networks – especially in France, Spain, and Italy – gave rise to several information and support activities, addressed to national LAGs, in the cooperation field⁷.

5 *Communication to Member States, Communication n.94/C 180/12 June 15th 1994.*

6 *For more details on this phase see the documents drawn up by the European Observatory and by the Rural National Network. The main texts are listed in the bibliography of this Volume.*

7 *For further information on the activities carried out by the Italian Leader Network – entrusted to the INEA– see the annual reports on the results obtained submitted to the Mipaaf (M.A. of the Network).*

The investment made by the European Commission, both in terms of financial aid and structures, to support cooperation projects, gave great results in this programming phase. In fact 255 project files were funded at European level which included almost half of the selected LAGs(463 out of 906 selected LAGs). At the same time the strategic choice to maintain a “European” direction of this instrument reinforced the sense of belonging to an enlarged “rural European community” in which it was possible to give rise to cooperation actions.

In that period the enthusiasm of LAGs towards territorial cooperation led some of them to test this tool also on a small scale. Thus the first experiences of “proximity cooperation” took place among LAGs selected in the same regional environment or belonging to neighbouring regions and especially aiming at enhancing common resources such as environmental and agricultural ones or even at qualifying the local human capital⁸. As for the Leader I, the LAGs once more led the way in the exploration of new areas of intervention and, in this case as well, they received from their Regional Authorities the financial support they needed to cover the participation costs although such a support was not foreseen by the relevant legislation of the Leader II.

1.2.2. Territorial Cooperation in Leader+

The experimentation carried out by LAGs in the Leader II pushed the European Commission to extend the action field of cooperation to the following Leader+ (2000-2006 phase) – transnational cooperation was extended de facto to non-European territories and assisted by inter-territorial cooperation (cooperation among LAGs belonging to the Member State).

At the same time, in order not to waste the experiences gained by the LAGs selected in the preceding Leader editions – but not confirmed in the Leader+ – and to enhance the added value of cooperation in rural territories, the Commission “Guidelines”⁹ gave access to the instrument of cooperation also to ex-Leader I and II territories and to other rural areas organized in accordance with the Leader approach, provided that the latter were recognized by national/regional authorities.

Moreover, during the programming period of Leader+ the European Union welcomed twelve new member States, though six of them had already adopted measures like the ones in Leader during the previous programming period. This increased the possibilities for cooperation in Europe of LAGs.

The opportunity to practice inter-territorial cooperation was widely exploited by LAGs. In Italy, for example, cooperation represented 50% of the fulfilled projects. This is probably due to the fact that, unlike transnational cooperation, it appears to be within the reach of all territories as it shows less complex management aspects – it obviously has the advantage of eliminating language problems as well as to reduce costs related to distances, but it also gives the chance to mitigate procedural problems (same Managing Authority or, at least, same

8 For further information on the experiences made in cooperation for territorial proximity carried out in Italy during this phase see C. Zumpano “La cooperazione di prossimità nel Leader: l’esperienza dei Gruppi Italiani, in Rete Leader”, n.3, 1999.

9 European Commission, Guidelines for the implementation of Leader Cooperation, Brussels, February 2003.

Member State).

On the transnational front (among Member States), the Leader+ phase made it possible to consolidate several cooperation projects started under Leader II (thanks to the partnership extension) and to set more ambitious objectives¹⁰. Moreover, the partnerships previously established could continue their cooperation on different issues. It is worthy of note that the cooperation projects among Member States included cross-border projects as these were often implemented in Leader contiguous territories, separated by a common border, or in areas showing many common features like the language¹¹, although belonging to different Member States.

Instead, the action of partnerships in areas outside the European Union appeared more limited as there exist dedicated tools for them, more significant than the Leader at least from the financial point of view. The limited availability of financial resources¹², as well as the limits set in the recognition of actions and costs¹³, in fact influenced the actions of the LAGs in this field. In spite of this fact, several projects with non-European countries were carried out most of which addressed to Mediterranean Third Countries (MTC). These projects were mainly fulfilled by LAGs belonging to European countries bordering the Mediterranean Basin – France, Spain, Italy, Portugal, and Greece. Within these countries, the LEADER areas inside southern European regions were the main promoters of the projects originated by common issues and problems similar if not even complementary. Within this area a total number of 16 cooperation projects were counted by the IAMM in Montpellier, 9 of which carried out by French LAGs and 5 by Spanish local action groups. Among the Mediterranean Third Countries involved, Morocco showed the higher degree of participation with 6 projects, followed by Algeria involved in 5 projects and then Tunisia with a number of three¹⁴. As for Italy, on the Mediterranean front only one project was recorded, started by LAGs in the region of Apulia cooperating with some countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea (Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Malta)¹⁵. The promotion of the cultural heritage, the support for the production of typical Mediterranean crops, the safeguard and of natural resources represented the main areas of intervention by means of actions aiming at strengthening the

10 As an example mention is made of the projects “I Cammini d’Europa”, “Eurovillaggi” e “Birdwacting”. For further information see the repertoires of cooperation projects developed by the National Network in various stages of the programming.

11 This is the case, for example, of the LAGs acting under the independent provinces of Trento and Bolzano which have focused on the cooperation with Austrian and German LAGs; as well as a LAG from Friuli which has cooperated with the tourist offices in Slovenia. For further details on the projects see the Index of Leader + transnational cooperation projects drawn up by the National Network for Rural Development.

12 It is to be reminded that, on the whole, almost 540 million euros were allocated to Leader cooperation in Europe in the 2000-2006 programming period.

13 As for cooperation projects towards non-EU countries, Leader acknowledged only the incurred expenses within European Leader territories at the expense of the European Fund.

14 The information on Leader cooperation with MTC are from the study “Les partenariats euro-Méditerranéens conduits par les groupes Leader+ Européens”, made in the 15 Member States by the “Institut Agronomique Méditerranéen of Montpellier” (IAMM) in cooperation with the French Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. The study concerned the implementation phase of Leader+(2000-2006) and was completed in spring 2006. Address to it further details.

15 A more detailed analysis on this experience, and also on other projects, is contained in C. Zumpano (edited by) *Le buone prassi per lo sviluppo rurale: una raccolta di iniziative, esperienze e progetti di cooperazione tra territori (2009)*”.

sense of belonging, at consolidating the exchange of technical and scientific knowledge, and support joint promotional measures.

A theme in particular proved to be shared by all projects i.e. the application of the Leader method as a tool to better the local territorial organization not only in the rural areas within MTCs – which could benefit from the experience already consolidated in Leader areas – but also in European territories which, sharing with non-European environments the Leader approach, could analyse its constitutive elements enriching them with new creative aspects and participation.

As for the content, the passage from Leader II to Leader+ represented, for cooperation, a passage towards more structural interventions. At this stage the Commission recommended – for cooperation under Leader+ – the surpassing of a mere exchange of experiences. According to the Commission cooperation must involve *“the implementation of a joint project, if possible supported by a shared structure”*¹⁶. Joint activities may relate to various aspects, from design sharing to the completion and/or marketing of products and/or services as well as the organization of joined events including ensuring the operation of the joint structure¹⁷ set up for that purpose.

From the regulatory and procedural point of view, the passage from Leader II to Leader+ represented for cooperation the giving out of the driving role that the European Commission played in the former edition. The governance for cooperation was addressed to every single Member State charged with the management of all the different phases including the initial support actions (from the planning to the fulfilment of the project). However, in order to facilitate the harmonization of the procedures of transnational cooperation projects in every State, the European Union issued some guidelines and established a Steering Committee – a sort of “control room” for cooperation, aiming at fostering communication among Member States during the project approval phase. In the implementation phase, the Committee assumed a more general function becoming a recurring “appointment” to take stock of the achievements made by the Leader initiative as a whole, leaving little room for debate on the issues concerning cooperation and, therefore, for the adoption of joined solutions.

The initial focus of the Community legislators, following the path of the experiences made in the previous edition, was to give a major role to the network system in the cooperation field having “formally” introduced among the functions of the national network systems the support to cooperation projects to be carried out in full synergism with the European network. Yet the European network (Leader+ Observatory) as well as most of the national ones were selected with a considerable delay, becoming operational only when the Leader programmes – and in many cases also the local development plans (LDPs) – had already been started. However, despite the strong delays recorded in the start-up phase, the Leader network systems (both the national and the European one) were able to start several support actions in order to enhance cooperation hence backing up LAGs in the design phase (especially the new ones). Thus databases for the research of partners were made up again, and

16 European Commission, *Guidelines for administrative implementation of cooperation projects among rural areas*, Brussels, February 2003.

17 *The need to build up a shared structure responsible for the project joined activities is strongly advocated by the Commission which gives the LAGs wide freedom in the choice of the legal form to be adopted. However, as far as transnational cooperation is concerned, in order to facilitate the work in different States with different regulations, the European Commission recommends the use of an EEIG (European Economic Interest Grouping).*

transnational events were organized mostly by national networks to enable meetings between LAGs and to discuss the main issues.

In some States, especially those characterized by a strong administrative decentralization, national “control rooms” were created to promote the harmonization of the procedures. Italy was among these countries and in 2004, on the initiative of the Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies with the support of the National Network, it established a technical table on cooperation consisting of the Ministry representatives as well as the 21 Managing Authorities of the regional Leader programmes. These recurring meetings represented the occasion to discuss problems related to the start-up of Leader cooperation, and enable discussions among MAs to reach agreements on cooperation implementation procedures. The continuous confrontation at regional and national levels resulted in the drafting of a series of guidelines which represented a reference point for Italian MAs trying to harmonize the implementation procedures. The effort made by the European Leader network was rewarded with the start and fulfilment of a significant number of projects – 383 transnational cooperation projects were carried out with the involvement of 464 LAGs at European level¹⁸.

1.2.3. Territorial cooperation in Rural Development Plans

As for the rural Development Plans (RDPs), the 2007-2013 phase – characterized by the Leader approach mainstreaming¹⁹ and thus by the cooperation tool – is to promote the capitalization of past experiences, at least according to the legislators. In this respect, as indicated in the guidelines adopted by the Commission (2008)²⁰, cooperation is defined as a key action of the Leader approach and, more than this, as a constituent of rural development strategy and not just an additional element. Moreover, in this phase, it is characterized by openness towards a wider audience of local actors. In order to exploit the full potential of cooperation, and make it accessible to all LAGs, the EU guidelines also suggest that cooperation may be consisting of “soft” actions as well as productive ones, giving LAGs the possibility to adjust their interventions according to their maturity level and the territorial needs. At the same time, resuming a concept already existing in Leader+, the EU guidelines emphasize the need to start common actions to be jointly implemented as if to underline the need to seek a more substantial integration among partners in the implementation of cooperation projects. Moreover, meaning not to limit the action field of the LAGs, the guidelines remarked that “Joint actions... might also be focused on capacity building, transfer of experience on local development through e.g. common publications, training seminars, twinning arrangements (exchange of programme managers and staff) leading to the adoption of common methodological and working methods or to the elaboration of a joint or

18 Source: European Observatory Leader+.

19 As it is known, while in the past editions Leader was recognized as a Community Initiative and could count on a dedicated Programme, In the phase 2007-2013 this approach has conveyed into the Rural Development Programme (RDP) becoming one of the intervention Axis (to be precise the fourth).

20 European Commission, Guide for the implementation of the measure “cooperation” in the Axis Leader framework for Rural Development Programmes 2007-2013 (RD12/10/2006 rev3).

coordinated development work”²¹.

Although cooperation is not to be considered as mandatory for LAGs, it should be said that it represents a priority in the selection of Local Development Plans. For this reason cooperation is considered by the Commission one of the most qualifying and appropriate tools to strengthen the local development strategies. Thus cooperation is given the task to “widen the local perspectives”, therefore the need to ensure consistency between cooperation projects and Local Development Plan (LDP) strategies is recalled and underlined in the policy papers. Consequently, LDP strategies should be coherent with those foreseen by RDPs, the National Strategic Plan (NSP), and Community Strategic Guidelines.

At the same time the Commission confirms the importance of cooperation in creating a EU identity connected to local, regional, and national ones. Like in the 2000-2006 period, also during the 2007-2013 phase the network system was given a fundamental role for the start and consolidation of cooperation projects. Differently from the past however, networks could provide a much larger range of support actions. In fact, as it is known, the mainstreaming effect of the LEADER resulted in the adoption of a network system not only addressed to Local Action Groups, but also to all the actors involved in rural development. This feature, in itself very ambitious, required the adoption, both at national and Community levels, of a rather complex management architecture and governance of the Networks which showed significant delays in the set-up of organizational systems²². However the necessity to ensure support in other fields and for different themes – more substantial from the point of view of costs – such as business investments and agro-environments diverted the attention from the instrument of cooperation as it was considered of minor importance compared to other RDP measures. If we consider also the recurring delays in the start-up of the Leader approach in most of the Member States, it appears understandable but not justifiable the slow start that the instrument cooperation in recording in the current programming phase.

Although a kind of slowness in starting cooperation projects has always characterized the early years of implementation of the various Leader editions, in this phase, however, it has assumed alarming proportions, for example, it is to consider that in our Country, five years after the start of the 2007-2013 programming period, only 29 cooperation projects are operational, 15 of which are transnational²³.

The introduction of the Leader approach inside RDPs has made the traditional problems of cooperation chronic (problems like the complexity and discrepancies of procedures, adoption of faulty timing, confrontation of different cultures, language problems), therefore decision-making processes for approval and management have resulted more contorted.

21 In fact, the definition of “joined action”, and especially its material or non-material nature, has represented during the different editions a debated issue on which a shared position among Member States has never been found. A further effort on this direction has been made during the present programming phase with the setting of a specific group at the European Rural Network. For results see records on the web site http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader/leader/focus-groups/it/focus-group-3_it.cfm

22 In fact, in order to avoid delays deriving from the previous phase, the European Commission has envisaged a time limit for the fulfilment of the setting procedures related to the European and National Network i.e. 31st of December 2008. Although it has been respected from a formal point of view (the Network setting), the arrangement took over a year and a half. For any details on the role played by national networks during the phase 2007-2013 and in particular the Italian one, see C. Zumpano, 2011.

23 Source: database for the National Rural Network cooperation projects, available for details on the content of each surveyed project (www.reterurale.it).

Likewise, the presence of a network system loaded with multiple objectives and priorities has made it more difficult to adopt a joint vision towards the control of support actions addressed to cooperation.

Probably, in the spare time left, something will be recovered, especially from the financial point of view, but it will be nothing much compared to the huge potential that this intervention tool could unleash thanks to the expertise that a significant number of LAGs can be proud of in the management of cooperation projects.

1.3. Cooperation projects under the different editions of Leader: comparing participation, financial resources and areas of intervention.

The institutionalization of the cooperation tool under the Leader approach, has made it more and more functional towards the socio-economic development of rural areas, changing, at the same time, the type and the areas of intervention according to the variable needs of the territory. In the course of the different editions, cooperation has developed first of all in terms of numbers. In fact, on the one hand there is an increasing number of LAGs which have decided to make use of this tool, on the other hand it is evident an increase in the average of projects for each LAG. The variables examined in the following analysis consider both the national and the European dimensions.

1.3.1. Participation

In 1991, in the first edition of LEADER, the programme included 217 LAGs all over Europe (EU-12)²⁴ with a percentage of 23% of Local Action Groups (49 in absolute terms) that spontaneously joined into forms of cooperation not regulated by specific legislation. The 49 LAGs, 4 of which in Italy, started 17 cooperation projects (The Italian selected LAGs were 29 in total). [cf. Table 1.1]

Tab. 1.1 – Information summary for Leader I, Leader II, Leader+ and Axis IV

Programme Edition	n. States EU	Europe				Italy			
		number of LAGs	n. of LAGs in cooperation	%of LAGs in cooperation	n. of Projects	number of LAGs	n.of LAGs in cooperation	%of LAGs in cooperation	n.of Projects
Leader	12	217	49	23%	17	29	4	14%	4
Leader II	15	906	463	51%	255	203	116	57%	107
Leader+	21	1.153	464	40%	383	132	125	95%	129
Axis IV	27	2.308	*	*	*	192	*	*	*

* n.b. Cooperation data for Axis IV refer to May 2013

Source: Our processing on ENRD data

With **Leader II** (1994-1999) transnational cooperation, as previously mentioned, was included as a measure of specific action (measure c) and was characterized by a large number of participating LAGs and implemented projects. The programme included 906 LAGs in Europe

24 Malcom Moseley, "Starting Transnational Cooperation: the Leader I experience", October 1994.

(EU-15) slightly more than half of which (463 in absolute terms) took part in cooperation²⁵. The total number of projects carried out at European level was 255, 56 of which shared with Italian LAGs playing the role of leaders (21% of the total submitted projects). In Italy 107 transnational cooperation projects were presented shared by 116 cooperating LAGs.

With **Leader+** (2000-2006) confidence in the capitalization of cooperation experiences increased and cooperation could benefit from a dedicated Axis (Axis II). At the beginning of the programming phase the number of selected LAGs (EU-15) was 895 and in 2004 it grew up to 1,153 due to the admission of 6 new Member States inside the EU. 52% of the selected LAGs (a number of 464) were involved in cooperation projects (both inter-territorial and transnational ones).

Only 21 out of the 27 Member States potentially interested in the Community initiative put it into practice and only 19 of them provided financial resources for cooperation within Leader. The rural areas participating in Leader cooperation projects as partners were all included in 22 Member States since some of them – such as Malta, Cyprus, Slovenia, and Romania – joined the projects with rural partnerships similar to LAGs, although they had not activated Leader measures nor the ones envisaged by the Axis II. Moreover in some other States like Poland, although they had foreseen the activation of Leader measures and cooperation, none of the LAGs joined transnational cooperation projects.

The projects promoted by Italian LAGs accounted for 11% of the total number. The average of cooperation actions made by European LAGs was 1 project per LAG (an increased number if compared to 0.6 under Leader II) in a total of 464 cooperating LAGs. In Italy, the selected LAGs were 132, a decreased number in comparison to the 203 under Leader II. Nevertheless they were characterized by a greater variety, both, from the number of participants point of view (also due to the association of a higher number of Leader II LAGs), and the number of areas included in the selected Leader territory. 125 of these LAGs implemented the activities foreseen by the 129 cooperation projects surveyed in Italy, 62 of which were transnational and 67 inter-territorial, with an average of 1 project per LAG compared to 0.9 under Leader II.

It is well known that in the present programming phase (2007-2012) the LEADER and cooperation have been introduced in the mainstreaming within the Axis IV-Leader Approach of Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) with a dedicated measure i.e. the measure number 421. In this phase all Member States (and Regions as well) must include the Leader Approach in their RDPs, and the presence of cooperation inside Local Development Plans of LAGs is considered as a reward criterion as long as it is consistent with local development. In this edition, characterized by the accession of new Member States inside the EU, the figures referring to the Leader have doubled – the LAGs selected in Europe²⁶ are 2,308 and transnational projects notified to the European Commission in June 2013 turned out to be 360. It should be underlined that these data have not yet been confirmed given the significant delay of the Axis IV and the Measure 421 in proceeding throughout Europe. In Italy the selected LAGs are 192 and, at the end of June 2013, the cooperation projects were 29 – 15 of which transnational and 14 interterritorial²⁷.

25 AA.VV. *La cooperazione Leader in Italia, monograph of the ReteLeader magazine, n. 11, spring 2012.*

26 Data related to Bulgaria and Romania are lacking.

27 Source: National Rural Network (NRN) database.

It is possible to conclude, by means of the analysis so far carried out, that in the period of time ranging from the first Leader edition in 1991 to the present edition, the number of selected LAGs in Europe has increased tenfold shifting from a number of 217 to 2,308. The largest increase was recorded during the passage from Leader I to Leader II, in other words from the experimental phase to the institutionalized one, and this was partly due to the inclusion of some new Member States and therefore of new territories. However, what is interesting is the number of cooperating LAGs. In fact under Leader II they increased in Europe both in terms of absolute numbers (from 49 to 463) and in percentage(passing from 23% to 51%). This phenomenon was surely influenced by the introduction of the specific measure, i.e. cooperation, in both phases of the initiative. Under Leader+ the percentage of LAGs involved in cooperation at European level decreased while the number of projects increased, therefore the average number of the projects implemented by each LAG rose (shifting from 0.6 to 0.8). In Italy the situation appeared different in fact both the percentage of cooperating LAGs under Leader+ (95%) and their participation in the projects increased with an average of 1 project per LAG instead of 0.9 recorded under Leader II. As for the current programming phase, the lack of consolidated data is preventing the analysis of the European LAGs tendency to cooperation, and even the number of currently active projects per LAG is uncertain. The same uncertainty concerns Italian data as, at present, the recorded number of active project is still too low, although 93% of the LAGs involved in LDPs have initially declared their intention to cooperate, and all this makes inadequate the comparison of data.

1.3.2. Financial resources

An overview of Leader evolution in financial terms, could highlight the strategic role that cooperation has gradually played in local development. The financial resources allocated for Leader I, during its early phase of experimentation, amounted to some €390 million at European level (EU funds) 10% of which (€38million) allocated to Italy. In this phase, as already stated, financial resources dedicated to cooperation were not envisaged.(cf. Table 1.2)

Table 1.2 – Public Leader Funds/resources Envisaged from 1994 to Present (M €)

Programme Edition	Europe		Italy	
	Leader	Cooperation	Leader	Cooperation
Leader II	3,868	138	875	30
Leader +	5,000	504	746	57
Axis IV	9,307	432	1,321	92

Source: our processing on EU data

In 1994 the financial burden of the resources allocated for the LEADER at European level was completely different as it reached € 3 billion of the total public finance. These figures are relevant as they represent the great results obtained in the experimentation phase showing the strategic role played by the Leader approach in the development of rural areas. Amounts referring to cooperation range from 1 to 5 per cent of the Regional Leader Programmes (RLPs) and the national ones, with a total grant of some € 140 million. Assistance funding was added to it during the early design phases of the projects and was directly managed by the EU (€ 4 million).

With regard to the cooperation activation procedures, it was found that in some territories the LAGs were in charge of including in their financial plans the resources needed

for the implementation of the projects included in the Local Action Plans (LAPs). In other areas, the allocation of resources was gradual and LAGs received their financial envelopes after the submission of their proposals to the Managing Authority of the Community Initiative. In Italy, the total amount initially allocated under the measure C was some € 4 million of public resources. However, during the implementation of the initiative, almost all Regions – while restructuring their financial plans – reduced the funds provided under the measure C transferring them under measure B (Rural Innovation Programme). In particular, the availability of funds on measure C was reduced by some 20% in total, although, in some specific situations, the reduction reached values exceeding 50% (e.g. in regions like Veneto and Liguria). This choice should be ascribed primarily to the difficulties encountered by all Regions in activating such a territorial programming that, compared with the traditional territorial interventions (i.e. local or sectorial), showed a higher complexity due to the transnational dimension of the interventions. Thus the public resources actually allocated for cooperation were some € 23 million with an average of € 200,000 per LAG.

During the following programming phase, planned public funds²⁸ under Leader+ at European level, reached € 5 billion (EU-27), showing a 40% increase compared with the previous programming phase. Cooperation, which in this edition could benefit from a dedicated Axis (Axis II), had at its disposal € 504 million that is 11% of all the resources available for LEADER. In Italy, the initiative could count on € 746 million in total of public resources 8% of which – € 57million – were allocated for cooperation. Therefore the financial resources for cooperation doubled if compared to Leader II. Each LAG received on average € 300,000 to satisfy their need for cooperation – € 100,000 more than under Leader II.

During the 2007-2013 programming period, the Leader approach has been inserted into the financial plan of the Rural Development Programmes, and Regulation 1698/2005 states that the budget devoted to Axis IV cannot be less than 5% of the planned resources for rural development. In this phase in Europe, almost € 9 billion have been allocated for the Leader, i.e. a 44% increase compared to Leader +. Resources for cooperation have decreased amounting to € 432 million, and recording a 13% decrease. It should be underlined that the data are referring to May 2013 – due to the strong delay on the measure cooperation – and it is therefore likely that the budget initially dedicated to measure 421 will be further deducted and reduced as a result of the resetting of the financial plans on other measures. As far as Italy is concerned, Axis IV has had over €1 billion available, and cooperation has recorded a 38% increase compared to Leader+, reaching the sum of € 92 million. Also in Italy the considerable delays in the activation of the measure have made a number of LAGs readjust their financial plans in favour of other Leader measures, going from € 96 million, originally envisaged for cooperation projects, to the currently calculated € 92 million.

1.3.3. Areas of intervention

Besides cooperation figures, it would be interesting to consider the development of the themes referring to projects, in order to verify their impact on the territory, starting from the changings referring to the different kind of interventions to the different programming cycles. For this purpose, it has been used a method of analysis aiming at grouping projects by area of intervention and by type of action, trying to find a common line between the different editions

²⁸ Financial data relating to Leader+ are taken from the ex-post Leader+ Evaluation Report concerning the European field (Cf. References).

of the Leader. Referring to the thematic areas in Leader II, we have retraced the changes in the types of cooperation interventions over the years, in the light of the macro-themes used in the current programming phase.

In terms of numbers, the percentages referring to the themes addressed in cooperation projects inside Europe, are rather constant in some sectors like tourism and agriculture (e.g. valorisation of local products). The sector of “SME, Crafts and Local Services” already active under Leader II with a percentage of 7%, split up in the following editions – partly merging into the theme area of “local products” and partly going under the theme “life quality”. During the first edition of Leader (Leader I), the percentage referring to cooperation actions in the touristic sector represented 52% of the 17 activated projects, and the second most important sector was agriculture followed by the projects focusing on the sharing of LAGs operation practices. Under Leader II the percentage related to tourism interventions decreased (32%), and the agricultural sector developed with a percentage of 35% while environmental issues were introduced considering the environment in a wider perspective which included natural, human and cultural resources. In the light of this, it is possible to underline the fact that during the implementation phase of rural development policies, a new model of territorial development emerged, according to which the rural territory was seen as a set of social relationships, institutions’ aggregation, a social and geographical space where development was enhanced not only by agriculture but also by a range of non-agricultural factors. This is the reason why in the year 2000, besides the already consolidated themes such as tourism (33%) and the valorisation of local products (10%), in Leader+ the issue regarding the protection of the cultural heritage rose – i.e. the recovering of local identities – and concerned 17% of the cooperation projects around Europe. Another new theme introduced during this phase was the improvement of the quality of life which included activities to promote social insertion and creation of services for the population. Thus, after the reading of the LAPs of the LAGs acting in the current programming phase, as well as their cooperation proposals, it is clear that this theme is becoming more and more prevailing (36%). On the other hand, in Italy, cooperation and the LEADER seem to act in a more consistent way in order to consider and meet such a need since, as we all know, during this phase several MAs have focused the Leader approach on Axis 3 dedicated to the improvement of the quality of life. The analysis of the projects recorded in the present databank of the Rural National Network, and therefore already active, has confirmed this fact showing a 51% for the tourism, 20% for the quality of life and 7% for the valorisation of local products. However, it should be underlined that data relating to Axis IV Leader-measure 421 are merely indicative and may change during the programming phase.

Provided that the classification of themes is always something empirical since most of the activities under cooperation projects are across-the-board, we have also tried to observe the changes occurred inside the thematic areas and concerning all the actions over the different editions. Just to be clear, a project classified under the tourist theme, in the first Leader edition, would involve some kind of actions intended to change over the years – from actions of structural resetting to actions of networking and vice versa. The macro-themes mentioned below are: Tourism, Valorisation of Local Products, and Quality of Life. To provide a comprehensive picture of the projects carried out during the different editions, we have also analyzed the projects related to the category “SMEs, Crafts and Local Services” specified only in Leader II and subsequently merging into the objective “Economic Diversification and Improvement of the Quality of Life”. This kind of projects, missing in Leader I, in Leader II were aiming at exploiting handcrafted products typical of the area not only as a recovery of the cultural heritage of the territory, but especially to create new forms of revenue not directly deriving from farming. These projects were aiming at regenerating artisan shops and

recovering traditions through the organization of training workshops and courses addressed to young people. Also know-how exchanging – in order to create shared techniques to approach the global market – became the objective of several projects in this sphere. This theme was also included in Leader+ cooperation projects dedicated to the enhancement of artistic, music and craft products through interventions aimed at the transmission of knowledge. In this area, in fact, the projects dedicated to the creation of training paths were various as well as internships and training seminars often held at the workshops. Moreover cultural events were organized in which local artists were invited to exhibit their works and products.

From the analysis of cooperation projects in Leader I, in the field of tourism and thus deriving from the free association of LAGs, it has emerged that cooperation actions were mostly aiming at creating relationships between territories to facilitate information and know-how sharing, mainly by means of meetings meant to create paths in order to increase the value of local culture and heritage of all the areas involved in the projects, in the tourism sector. The target was typically the creation of a tourism product more appealing to new markets in many cases the networking of those involved in the projects gave birth to such forms of thematic systems able to share experiences and facilitate the exchange of knowledge through the organization of seminars and workshops. Finally, the study visits in the tourism sector helped disseminate good practices in the management of rural tourism in the areas involved.

Under leader II transnational cooperation was intended for joint design, production and marketing of goods or services in any area of rural development.²⁹ Therefore, cooperation actions in the tourism field continued to be performed as “light” interventions but they also took a progressive systemic aspect becoming the method to share intervention techniques and procedures in order to overcome local-dimension practices. The most frequently started activities were training sessions to be performed through study visits to facilities and businesses operating in the partner territories. Furthermore the creation of integrated tourist packages, as well as the creation of promotional tools such as the setup of electronic catalogues, and Web sites (e.g. Green Europe, Connaître l’ Europe, etc.) allowed the areas involved to learn from one another, but at the same time to attract a greater number of tourists. In the end, although Leader II was not focused on large structural measures, it included cooperation actions centered on the restoration of farm buildings and traditional farmhouses for tourism purposes, to promote and market the territory (e.g. European Villages). The principle ruling such a kind of actions was generally the desire to apply, at local level, common strategies offering similar and homogeneous services.

The definition of cooperation contained in Leader+ regulation reiterates that it may not simply consist of a mere exchange of experiences but it must involve the implementation of a joined action if possible supported by a shared structure. While maintaining its features of “intangible” intervention tool, at its third experience, cooperation moved towards the systematization of all the experiences acquired up to that time in the tourism field. Thus, the organized activities took the form of actions aimed at implementing marketing strategies capable of enhancing territorial resources. For this reason the projects aimed at providing for the training needs of local tourism operators were many, in order to define quality standards. The exchange of experiences, then, was conceived as a tool to find a shared approach for

²⁹ Communication to Member States n.94/c 180/12, 15th June 1994, Art. 13.

tourist reception and creation of brands and common regulations . Also the recovery of the traditional heritage was the subject of several interventions– traditional productive activities (mining, transhumance, baked products), historical monuments (Napoleonic roads) and religious patrimony. The purpose of these actions was also the promotion of the territory as well as the offer of an integrated tourism product with tourist itineraries and tour packages. The dissemination of information through the creation of signage, information points and web portals represented the target of several cooperation projects in these sphere. The rise of new forms of tourism in rural areas – from sport tourism to sustainable one, and even wine – and food tourism – contributed to the concept of tourism activity as something compatible with the territory and contributing to the recovery as a chance for the creation of services available both to inhabitants and tourists.

Cooperation under Axis IV, as repeatedly pointed out, is still under development. As per regulation it can consist of “soft” actions as well as more structural measures.

The actions made in the tourism sector have been becoming more and more concrete and geared towards the enhancement of the production, and aim at adding value to local resources. The integrated promotion of the territory has become the subject of most of the projects proposing both the recovery and restoration of the existing patrimony by means of rebuilding actions and the marketing and networking of the facilities already existing on the territory. The creation of itineraries combining gastronomy, territorial sustainability and traditional culture has been fostered by projects creating promotional packages. Quality has stood out as a distinctive mark of the tourism in the involved territories – to this end initiatives for the training of tour operators and the adaptation of accommodation facilities have been increased. Territorial brands, at least at this stage of the programming period, appears less numerous, perhaps due to the rising idea that the promotion of a territory should not be just the output of a project but it must belong to an ongoing process of protection and enhancement of its distinctive resources. Finally, the creation of web networks related to the tourist offers has allowed the survey and supply of integrated and joined tourism products.

In the Axis IV – Leader Approach (e.g. the ongoing programming phase), the cooperation projects related to this sector are less numerous and more centred on interventions aiming at strengthening the relationships between crafts and culture/tradition than on interventions mainly focused on the development of production processes. These are cooperation projects envisaging information and/or training actions addressed to brokers operating on shared itineraries of local art and gastronomy through good-practices sharing among operators.

As for the valorisation of traditional products, seen as a theme area of interest, it should be considered that it took shape throughout the different Leader editions. It was initially regarded as “agriculture”. In fact the agricultural productive sector consisted of a big share of the early cooperation projects in the Leader I areas. However the actions were mostly addressed to the exchange of know-how and good practices (drying, culinary herbs marketing, etc.) among the territories involved through study visits and training activities. Moreover, the joined marketing of products from cooperation areas allowed the enlargement of the reference market of the project partners, and the creation of real and web networks of typical products.

During the Leader II programming phase the actions aiming at the valorisation of products were focusing on promotion and marketing. The design of portals, to enhance web marketing of products, as well as information on the peculiarities of the promoted resources, underlined the awareness of the territories as they were not considering agricultural and food

products as mere “fruit from the land”, but as a vehicle for culture and tradition diffusion. Thus, for this purpose, cooperation projects focused on the sharing of methods and studies of breeds, species and organoleptic properties. All around Europe several projects were carried out through actions seeking quality and related certification to legitimate genuineness and originality.

The same tendency was characteristic of cooperation in Leader+ when actions for the development and consolidation of the quality of products were supported by those addressed to entrepreneurs, to guide them towards process and product quality systems. Besides the marketing actions previously made, like the creation of web portals or information material on the properties of products, there was also the spreading of activities to make farms more competitive not only by means of modernization and innovation of enterprises, production-chain reorganization, promotion of the districts, or the introduction of Information and communication Technologies-ICT; but also through training measures addressed to farmers. During this phase also research activities were consolidated by the introduction of feasibility studies on the reorganization of production chains.

The Measure 421 in the Axis IV, currently provides only a few projects in this field. Basically it consists of promotional actions for the territory as a set of traditions and culture whose value could be increased thanks to typical products.

The traditional Mediterranean diet, which is appreciated for the variety and quality of its products, has interested a number of projects that have connected the areas involved in order to foster the integration of products and relative information. Therefore information and awareness actions characterize the sector in this edition. Also the recovery of methods and traditional techniques are conveying the message that a product is identified with the historical and cultural identity of the territory of origin. The marketing actions of baskets are integrated with those to promote tourism, while ITCs help to make products available through long distance networks. Also in this programming phase cooperation aims to increase the competitiveness of suppliers through the reorganization of the production chains (with the introduction of “Km 0” products – i.e. locally produced – and ethical purchasing groups), to support the creation of processes to improve the quality of products, as well as to the training of farmers increasingly seen as managers of a complex system of resources.

The Quality of Life as a theme includes the Leader II sub-themes Environment and Culture and Rural Development Assistance. Quality of Life is referring to those actions aiming at improving the living conditions of the population in a broad sense from the creation of services to the recovery of the local identity. This theme was not centered during the first edition of LEADER. In Leader I, in fact, this kind of actions were mostly linked to the governance of the new programme for the local cooperation of LAGs.

During the Leader II programming phase instead, the concept of landscape conservation, along with the need to protect the historical and cultural heritage to avoid rural depopulation, started to arise as well as the idea according to which a better management of the territory could lead to the respect of its peculiarities. The envisaged interventions, deriving from the sharing of good practices, concerned not only practical actions like the restoration of building or architectural sites of historical and cultural interest, but also information and awareness actions addressed to the population like the organization of events, workshops, or the promotional material design to promote the territory.

As far as the environment is concerned in the strict sense of the term, many projects were carried out aiming at the valorisation of natural areas (e.g. wetlands) through shared

managing methods or awareness actions addressed to the population. The development of these resources became also the occasion for the creation of themed itineraries with the creation of trails for hiking, horse riding, bike riding, etc... Finally, during this edition, cooperation projects could be focused on the renewal of the territory image seen from outside and inside, promoting the territories by means of cultural events, and sport competitions. Therefore, promotional interventions were strengthened by a series of actions aiming at recovering the local identity through training activities addressed to young people who were taught old traditional techniques. The aim was not just the creation of a crystallized image of the rural environment, but the recovery of handicraft activities and products to be modernized and put on the market. For the same purpose projects for the spreading of folk music, songs and dances represented the cue for local realities to identify themselves as singular identities to be compared with the realities of other partner Countries.

Finally, the cooperation actions aimed at improving the quality of life of rural people were meant to create local services, jointly managed with other realities or simply through the exchange of know-how. For example, interventions to diffuse the ICT (e.g. teleworking) provided the population with technologically advanced tools, creating new employment opportunities for the weaker sections of the population. The theme of the Quality of Life involved many projects in the Leader + programming phase, as already anticipated, and was enhanced with new sectors in which cooperation was essential to the development of new communication skills to interact with different cultural contexts, but in similar areas. Special attention was given to the cultural heritage, through actions aimed at recovering the historical memory of the various concerned territories, like for example the joined organization of artistic and literary events as rural identity expression. The networking of cultural infrastructures and expertise in the valorisation of historical contexts in some projects, allowed the conservation and promotion of the historical heritage in the territories. The projects under Leader + were characterized not only by immaterial interventions, but also by actions to recover buildings of historical, religious and architectural interest. As for environmental resources, cooperation was used to protect areas of high environmental value by actions of joined management of these areas or through the implementation of technical information databases. Finally, information and awareness activities addressed to the population on environmental issues were the core of several interventions during this programming period.

In Leader+, cooperation dealt with important strategic issues i.e. energy saving and the diffusion of renewable energy sources. For this reason information-gathering activities were organized through the creation of shared databases or the editing of manuals; information and awareness raising actions were made addressed to the population and enterprises through the organization of briefings, training courses and intercultural seminars. Furthermore, some cooperation projects proved to be functional in the trial of renewable energies for the creation of services, by pilot projects that offered the combination of ICT with alternative energy sources such as district heating.

During the current programming phase, the projects referring to the measure 421 operating in this sphere, after a preliminary analysis of the LDPs, seem to be the most numerous. This tendency is confirmed by the already started projects. The kind of interventions to be made are concerning the cultural and historical patrimony of the territories as well as the human heritage. At present, the recovery of the patrimony through the restoration of building is not being envisaged, while information and awareness raising actions have been substantially increased through the creation of local workshops to promote meetings between institutional representatives at different levels, professionals and University spokespeople. The activities planned in this sector aim to the innovation and integration of the

opportunities to enjoy the rural landscape and architectural heritage so that to add value to the territory and the tourism attractiveness. Cultural activities are being supported through the organization of cultural and promotional events, as well as through the training of young people in order to strengthen their sense of belonging to the native territory. Human capital is of key importance for cooperation as it is involved in social inclusion actions aiming at enhancing the participation of the disadvantaged population as well as at improving the sharing of innovation ideas and know – how to foster sustainable development and SMEs competitiveness and that of territories as well.

The cooperation projects dealing with the protection of natural resources, on the one hand, are aiming to the protection of the environmental heritage, on the other hand, they want to make this sector more competitive. As for the former, the suggested actions envisage the sharing of resource utilization methods (like thermal water) or tutorials and teaching sessions in order to preserve and enhance the environment and natural sites (cultivation methods for vegetable gardens and gardens, etc.). As far as the latter is concerned, that is the enhancement and the increasing of the sector competitiveness – in particular that of forests – actions for information exchange are carried out as well as pilot actions for the reorganization of wood-based industries. However, this kind of activities are being supported by awareness-raising actions addressed to the local population who is involved in joined territory management. Finally, this programming phase is including cooperation projects aiming at protecting environmental biodiversity, and the resources it contains, by means of research activities.

Table1.3 – Areas and types of projects of cooperation: a comparison of the different Leader editions

Scope	Priority Axis	Type	Leader I	Leader II	Leader+	Axis IV	Research Classification
Agriculture	Competitiveness	Creation of real and virtual Networks		*	*	*	Valorisation of local products
		Study visits/exchanges	*				
		Marketing of products	*	*	*	*	
		Studies and research		*	*	*	
		Charges Specification/brand		*	*	*	
		Reorganization of manufacturing process/commercialization r			*	*	
		Information and awareness raising			*	*	
Rural Tourism	Diversification of rural economy	Building restoration	*	*	*	Tourism	
		Creation of promotional packages/marketing	*		*	*	
		Itineraries	*	*	*	*	
		Publishing of brochures/promotional material		*	*	*	
		brand/standard creation			*	*	
		Human resources training	*	*	*	*	
		Territory promotion				*	
SMEs, Crafts and Local Service		Training seminar/educational paths		*	*	*	Cf note*
		Know-how		*	*	*	
		exhibitions, promotional events		*	*		
		Brand creation		*			
Environmental Protection and enhancement of living condition (Environment and Culture + Support to rural development)	Environmental Protection	Creation of common methods, know-how exchange		*	*	*	Quality of Life*
		Rural building recovery		*	*		
		Itineraries/marketing		*	*	*	
		Information and awareness raising		*	*	*	
		Enhancement/promotion of the territory		*	*	*	
		Cultural activities promotion (participation to events)		*	*	*	
		Studies and research				*	
	Quality of Life	Territory management	*	*	*	*	
		Service for the population		*	*	*	
		Local Identity (recovery of traditions)		*	*	*	
		Renewable energy production			*	*	
		Social inclusion				*	

* The activities contained in SMEs, crafts and local services are distributed between Valorization of Local Products and Quality of Life

Source: Our processing

The cooperation trend from 1990 to these days, both in terms of numbers and quality, stimulates a further consideration on the added value of a tool that, although complex and difficult to be applied, can make territories aware of their distinctiveness and, at the same time, out of isolation as they become able to find innovative solutions to common issues. From the analysis so far presented it is possible to infer that cooperation, seen as the exchange of information and expertise, was initially used as an exploration and experimentation tool for actions within areas of intervention neglected by other programmes. The gradual discovery of the indirect effects of this tool led to its wider application inside territorial development policies. All this implied the broadening of intervention areas and a change in the quality of the planned interventions. In fact, the interventions ranged from the creation of tourist itineraries – i.e. basic actions for tourism development – to the integrated promotion of the territory, or the exchange of expertise that, once acquired, was turned into information and awareness actions. Also the action range reportedly changed; in fact an increased attention to the local population spread – finally considered a sheer resource likewise wealth. For this reason training actions were strongly increased. Finally, the concept of competitiveness merely leading to income increase changed giving way to quality, thus studies and research projects were started as well as those for the definition of common regulations and certifications. These are clear signals showing how this instrument has no longer been seen as only a curious comparison with diversities, but as a real opportunity, especially for rural areas, to trigger processes of effective dynamization of local economies and improvement of the inhabitant's quality of life. Such an opportunity if successfully exploited would hinder the depopulation and isolation of territories.

1.4. Leader cooperation experience toward other territorial cooperation programmes: seen as added value.

As described in the previous sections of this volume, one of the hallmarks of Leader cooperation is represented by the "territorial scale" as it could range from local cooperation (meaning the formation of LAGs), to the inter-territorial one (same region, same state) or going beyond with transnational and cross-border cooperation between Member States reaching even international levels among non-European areas. This strong point has made cooperation a suitable instrument to achieve goals of different range, flexible enough to detect local needs and able to deal with the capitalization of local know-how in the cooperation field.

The opportunity to implement territorial cooperation projects within the Leader framework has represented a good training for the LAGs to become familiar with the tool cooperation and to capitalize on expertise in the fields of common intervention planning, partnership management, and fulfilment of administrative tasks (intervention management and reporting). Some LAGs have made the most of this amount of knowledge and skills taking part in the formulation of applications for other European cooperation programmes. Our survey, the results of which are shown in the second chapter of this volume, has recorded about 90 of these programmes more than half of which concerning the Interreg programme.

The reasons underlying the participation to other cooperation programmes relate to:

- Strategic choices made directly by the LAGs in order to broaden their intervention field as well as to increase the available financial resources, so as to consolidate their role of local development agencies.

- Specific requests received from local institutional actors interested in promoting cooperation experiences – especially the transnational ones – in their territories.
- Reports or requests by external partners with which there has been a collaboration on the occasion of Leader cooperation projects, or they have been in contact with, thanks to the communication activities of the Leader network system.

The early experiences of LAGs in the field of extra-Leader cooperation programmes date back to the Leader II phase, but found a fertile ground during the Leader+ phase and the current programming phase, that is when they showed greater skills and expertise in managing the “dossiers” to be proposed for other programmes, in coping with the management and reporting about the interventions made (regulated by procedures different from the EAFRD ones), and in managing partnership relations. It should be noted that their actions, within the extra-Leader programmes, have not always been simple and obvious. In fact, in some cases, they have had to deal with the peculiar nature of their partnership structures which, as it is well known, consist of public and private actors and have not always been acknowledged inside the Programmes. In fact, in an early phase for example, this fact represented an obstacle to formal acceptance as partners in the Interreg projects.

Despite some initial difficulties due to the public-private nature of their partnership structure, the LAGs have demonstrated, through their work, the relevance of the method acquired by means of Leader cooperation also inside other programmes, and have spread among their partners their innovative expertise in supporting shared, participatory and sustainable development paths.

The achieved results assume a strong value considering that Leader cooperation is not an aim in itself, but a means to enhance the goals of local development plans. This represents a distinctive feature of the LAGs but it is also their key factor as the close connection with a local development strategy allows contacts among local, already-established partnerships and, above all, conveys cooperation actions towards the enhancement of already-started local development processes crediting local development with a non -local dimension. At the same time the bond with multisectoral and participatory intervention strategies adopted at local level provides an opportunity to intervene with a very wide range of actions concerning all the various themes of rural development. De facto this has represented an important novelty in the field of European territorial cooperation which is now more “project-shaped” rather than following “system actions”³⁰. Unlike other territorial cooperation projects, since its outset, Leader cooperation has required high integration standards among partners which have been expected to start and carry out shared projects and joint actions. Intermediate levels of implementation existing, for example, in some Interreg programmes have not been envisaged. For these reasons the financial resources needed to implement cooperation inside the LEADER have been allocated to each partner directly by the appointed Managing Authorities which have contributed to the approval of the project as a whole³¹. Therefore the LAGs themselves have had to report expenditures and then cope with the many financial-management procedures envisaged both at national and Community levels. The reverse negative aspect of

³⁰ *Integrated planning was introduced as a tool in the European territorial cooperation only from the 2007-2013 phase.*

³¹ *The negative side of this opportunity is the fact that, unlike others territorial cooperation programmes managed by a single MA (see INTERREG), the “active” participation of individual Managing Authorities in the approval of projects makes it much more complex the approval processes, dilating timing.*

such an opportunity has been represented by the fact that the active participation of different MAs in the projects approval has made even more complex the approval procedure lengthening its timing while other territorial cooperation programmes – like for example INTERREG – have been managed by a single Managing Authority. Another distinctive element of Leader cooperation is represented by the fact that, within it, some initial support actions have been envisaged to help territories face cooperation challenges. To be more precise, it is possible to distinguish two kinds of support: the one offered by the network system meant to back LAG “communities” as a whole providing, for the most part, information and methods; the “dedicated” one giving each LAG the possibility to rely on in order to cover preliminary expenses to start cooperation(partner research, preliminary meetings, the design of the joined action, etc.) while the first kind of support has been adopted in other kind of territorial cooperation programmes (e.g. INTERREG point) though showing features more information oriented than prone to support, the latter still represents a characteristic of the Leader method. Thus, the use of the acquired expertise within the Leader cooperation framework to deal with cooperation projects of different kind, has represented for the Local Action Groups the chance not only to consolidate their position at local level, but also to build relationships with transnational partnerships of a different nature(often more institutional and acting on a wider operational scale rather than local). At the same time they have had the possibility to deal with different EU funds (ERDF and ESF) characterized by different methodologies and procedures as well as with wider levels of physical planning, accounting of local requests. Moreover, the specificity of some programmes such as EQUAL, has given them the chance to strengthen their expertise on issues like social inclusion that will be addressed also in the future rural development programming phase .

The very competences acquired by the LAGs inside the extra-Leader framework, supplemented by those already reinforced inside the LEADER, should be more effectively exploited by the Community policies bestowing more space and visibility on LAGs. Furthermore, they should be granted more flexibility both in the choice of the cooperation actions to be performed and in their management and reporting. This would allow a full capitalization of the development paths taken at local level resulting from actions and interventions reinforced over the years and, as far as we are concerned, this means during the various editions of LEADER and different rural development policies. Leader cooperation should be able to intervene on issues especially needing an extra-local dimension – might they be falling or not under the measures or themes addressed to the LAGs “ex officio” or during the different programming phases.

2. LAGS and territorial cooperation projects: survey results

2.1. The objectives of the survey and the methodology

In 2012, INEA, in collaboration with Contesti, launched a study to analyse the level of participation of the Italian Local Action Groups (LAGs) in territorial cooperation projects.

The intent of this survey was to analyse the dynamics of cooperation both within the Leader Initiative and other Community Programmes, as well as to identify the LAG's propensity for implementing cooperative processes in the definition and implementation of territorial policies.

The main aim has been divided into three specific objectives, in order to focus on the following aspects:

1. the "propensity" of the LAGs for territorial cooperation within the LEADER³² framework (Leader II and Leader +) by the census and analysis of their projects;
2. the "propensity" of the LAGs for territorial cooperation within the extra-Leader framework by the census and analysis of their projects.
3. the effects of these experiences on local development processes in terms of acquisition/enhancement of know-how and expertise on specific issues, creation/expansion of institutional and commercial networks.

In methodological terms, the research was structured into two phases:

1. desk analysis aimed at:
 - finding the available literature and documents upon the instrument of territorial cooperation (implementation procedures, best practices, project presentations and experiences)
 - acquiring and processing of the information contained in the cooperation repertoires produced by the National Leader Network during Leader II and Leader +
 - analysing the websites of the LAGs to find information and data on territorial cooperation
 - collecting data and information about financed extra-Leader projects.
2. field analysis, carried on by a field survey involving the 192 LAGs selected in the current programming period (2007-2013). Anyway, the analysis took into account the transformation process occurred during the last three programming periods which had often an impact on LAG's partnership and territories. This procedure was adopted to avoid overlaps in the allocation of the cooperation analysed projects.

³² The term LEADER is used in the text to refer to Leader II and Leader +.

2.1.1. The desk analysis

The desk analysis was structured on the basis of the information acquired through the following sources:

- LAG's websites: census of the portals and the web pages of the 192 LAGs registered in National Rural Network database until the 22nd December 2011. The analysis showed a strong difference between Leader and extra-Leader³³ cooperation projects with reference to the processing, the storing, the indexing and the presentation of information;
- databases of Leader Cooperation projects: in particular the database of transnational cooperation projects produced by the European Commission during Leader+ and the databases on interterritorial and transnational cooperation implemented by the National Rural Network during Leader II and Leader +³⁴;
- other webpages and available documentation (catalogues, brochures, etc..) on extra-Leader cooperation programmes: in order to complete the analysis of the LAG websites, it was carried out an analysis of the leading portals and available databases relating to the extra-Leader Cooperation Programmes for the programming cycles 2007-2013 and 2000-2006 (see Table 2.1).

33 It was possible to take a census and find information about the projects in most of the cases. Only in few occasions data were not available or scarce: such projects were not analyzed.

34 Available at <http://leaderplus.ec.europa.eu/cpdb/public/project/CopDbSearch.aspx>

Table 2.1 – Websites of extra-Leader Cooperation Programmes (Periods: 2000-2006 and 2007-2013)

Website	Cooperation Programme	Programming Period
http://www.interreg4c.eu/approved_projects.html	Interreg III C	2000-2006
	Interreg IVC	2007-2013
http://www.interreg-alcotra.org/	Interreg III A Alcotra	2000-2006
	Interreg IV Alcotra	2007-2013
http://www.alpine-space.eu	Interegg III B Alpine Space	2000-2006
	Interegg IV Alpine Space	2007-2013
http://www.interreg.net/	Interreg III Austria	2000-2006
	Interreg IV Austria	2007-2013
http://www.interreg-italiasvizzera.it/interreg/	Interreg III A Italy-Switzerland	2000-2006
	Interreg IV Italy-Switzerland	2007-2013
http://www.ita-slo.eu	Interreg III A Italy-Slovenia	2000-2006
	Interreg IV Italy-Slovenia	2007-2013
http://www.interreg.gr	Interreg III A Italy-Greece	2000-2006
	Interreg IV Italy-Greece	2007-2013
http://www.italiamalta.eu	Interreg III A Italy-Malta	2000-2006
http://www.southeast-europe.net	South-East Europe (SEE)	
http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/culture/	Culture Programme	2007-2013
http://www.maritimeit-fr.net/	Maritime IT-FR	
http://www.central2013.eu	Central Europe	
http://www.adriaticpacbc.org	IPA Adriatic Cross Border	
http://www.enpi-info.eu	ENPI	
www.euroinfosicilia.it	Interreg IV Italy-Tunisia	

Source: our processing

2.1.2. The field analysis

The field survey was carried out during the spring-summer 2012 by the submission of a questionnaire to the LAGs. The intent was to complete the data collected indirectly (as mentioned above) in order to structure a thorough census of the in-progress and concluded projects and to identify the added value of cooperation using the qualitative information in questionnaires.

The census was realized by sending the questionnaire by e-mail to the 192 LAGs selected in this programming phase. The LAGs were invited to send it back via e-mail and were provided with help desk service and two e-mail addresses in case of clarification needs.

Regional offices of INEA were involved to raise awareness at local level and some “reminder” actions (e-mail and phone calls) were used to stimulate the LAG’s participation in the survey.

The questionnaire is divided into two macro sections according to the programming period: territorial or decentralized cooperation projects concerning the phase 2007-2013 or the period from 2000 to 2006 . Each macro section was structured in 3 parts:

Contents. Information on :

- financing programme and programming period
- project partners
- role of the LAG in the partnership (lead partner, partner, or other)
- Lead partner
- involved territories
- objectives, contents and main activities of the project and of the LAG.

Management. With reference to:

- economic and management aspects, including the total budget for project and LAG’s allocation
- duration of the project and status of implementation.

Progress. To highlight:

- obtained results
- main critical elements
- success factors and lessons learned
- temporal continuity of practices and activities carried out by the LAG
- reasons for the non-participation in cooperation projects.

2.1.3. The numbers of the survey

The whole LAGs surveyed were 215, of which:

- 136 sent the questionnaires back (136 out of 192 LAGs)
- 79 were identified by web research and reports. The main sources were the Repertories of the cooperation projects produced by the National Leader Network during the programming periods 1994-1999 and 2000-2006. Among the 79 LAGs, there are both the LAGs of the phase 2007–2013 that didn’t answer the questionnaire and LAGs selected in the previous editions of Leader³⁵.

³⁵ These LAGs are those whose activity has not been confirmed during the editions of Leader since 1999 until today, or LAGs which have changed their configuration due to merger with other LAGs or changes in the pertinence area (enlargement or restriction). In this case, we tried to match old and new LAGs basing bounds of different nature (territory, partnership, etc..).

With regard to the cooperation projects surveyed, the analysis focused on:

- cooperation projects carried out during the programming cycle 1994-1999 (Leader II) and o 2000-2006 cycle (Leader +). Cooperation projects belonging to Leader I and to the current programming period (2007 -2013) were not included in this analysis because in Leader I, cooperation was not foreseen³⁶, while, the current programming cycle has suffered of strong delays in the implementation of the Leader cooperation so that it was not possible, at the time of the survey, to complete the census;
- the last two programming cycles (2000-2006 and 2007-2013) for the cooperation projects carried out by the LAGs in the extra-Leader³⁷ field. In total, 331 cooperation projects were surveyed, of which 236 (71%) within the Leader framework and 95 within the extra-Leader programmes (29%), such as: Interreg, Equal, Culture, Decentralized Cooperation MAEE, etc.

The following elements were analysed for the whole projects surveyed:

- the role of the LAG as a lead-partner or partner in the projects considered
- the placement of the cooperation projects, both Leader and extra-Leader, by content (macro theme and sub themes)³⁸ (see Table 2.2)
- the type of cooperation (infra-regional, inter-territorial, transnational)
institutional, social, managerial and economic results identified
- the critical issues and lessons learned.

On the basis of the information collected and processed, three indicators were built (indicator of project design; indicator of project quality; indicator of involvement) in order to provide a picture of the LAG's approach towards cooperation, using a benchmarking logic. Subsequently, these indicators, through the adoption of specific statistical methods, were included in the index of cooperation, a synthetic measure defined to create a scale of comparison between the LAGs, thus highlighting the most performing Groups. The ratio of this analysis, however, is not properly to create a "rating" of the LAGs but to provide information upon their positioning with respect to the issues of the reference period (2000-2012), as well as to stimulate reflections to improve the current situation.

This chapter is divided into 5 sections, in addition to this one. The Section 2.2 shows the transnational dimension of cooperation, thus the European and non-European countries involved in the territorial cooperation projects analysed. The two following paragraphs (2.3 and 2.4) illustrate the main findings of the desk research and of the field research, thus distinguishing the cooperation projects carried out in the Leader field (Leader II and Leader +) from those related to the extra-Leader programmes. Paragraph 2.5 focuses on the indicator of

³⁶ Actually, as shown in Chapter I, even if not foreseen in this phase, LAGs gave life- spontaneously- to some cooperation experiences: 4 of the 23 LAGs selected in Italy took part in these projects. Information about these experiences is scarce, thus they were not included in the cluster of analyzed projects.

³⁷ With regard to the current cycle, the projects surveyed are related to the period considered in the investigation and are referred to May 2012.

³⁸ In order to identify the main and sub-themes we have taken into account the analysis carried out, over the years, by INEA in the different editions of the National Rural Network.

the territorial cooperation, highlighting its methodology and the main results and finally, the section 2.6 describes the main economic, social and institutional results achieved, the critical issues and lessons learned with the implementation of the cooperation projects.

Table 2.2 – Themes for the classification of the LEADER and extra-Leader cooperation projects

Macro- theme	Sub- theme
Local Products	Promotion
	Commercialization
	Information and awareness raising
Quality of life	Social cohesion
	Cultural activities
	Information and awareness raising
	Services
	Land Management
	Recovery of historical and cultural heritage
	Recovery of environmental heritage
Tourism	Promotion
	Itineraries

Source: our processing

2.2. The transnational dimension of cooperation

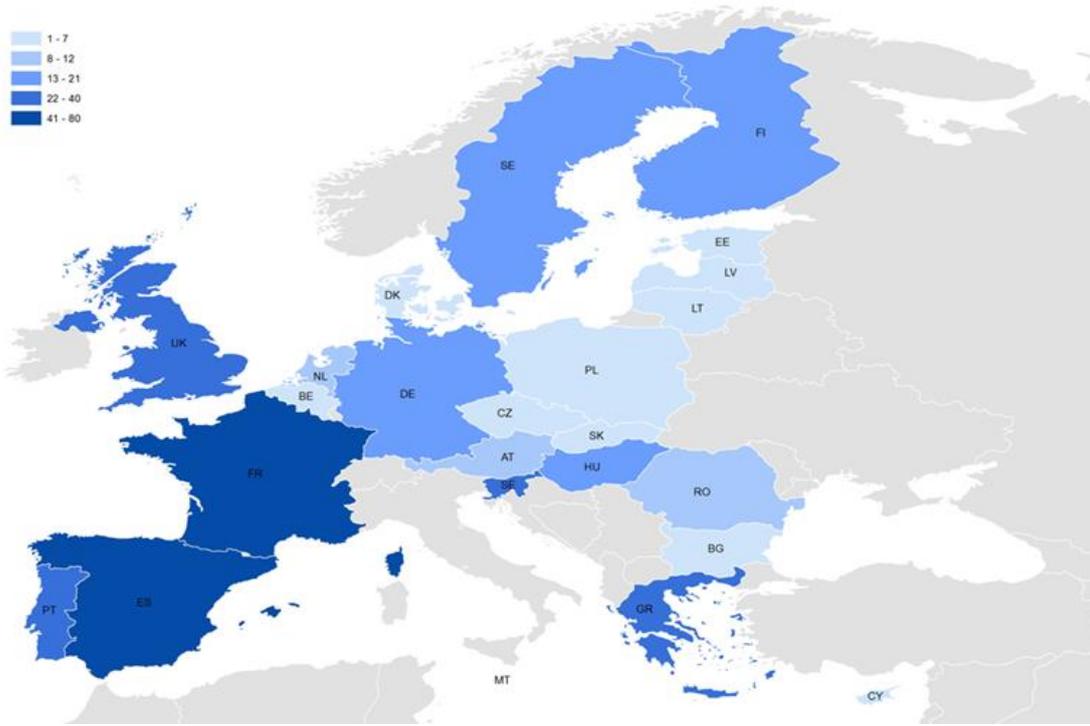
The Italian LAGs have promoted and implemented transnational cooperation projects within Leader and extra-Leader framework with both European Members States and Third countries. Overall, the number of transnational projects surveyed is 260.

The analysis of participation³⁹ of foreign countries in the cooperation projects identified highlighted that the EU Member States which took part more frequently in cooperation projects with Italy are: Spain (with 80 participations), France (65 participations), United Kingdom (40), Portugal (37) Slovenia (36) and Greece (35) (see Figure 2.1). In central-northern Europe it's relevant the participation of Finland and Germany, with 21 participations respectively .

The distribution of the participations of European Union Members States by theme highlights that roughly half of the total 444 participations count transnational cooperation projects on Quality of life, 28% of them concern projects on Tourism and one project out of five, deals with the Local products. A similar percentage was also observed in each of the countries involved, with the exception of Portugal, where 21 participations out of 37 aim at developing Local products (57%), 9 were on Tourism (24%) and 7 on Quality of life (19%). Focusing on the individual themes it emerges that, in the case of Local products, the presence of Mediterranean countries is high: of 91 participations, 24 can be assigned to Spain, 21 to Portugal, and 15 to France. (see Figure 2.2).

³⁹ The definition of "Participation in a project" identifies the participation of a LAG in a project both as lead-partner and partner.

Figure 2.1 – European Union countries involved with Italian LAGs in Leader and extra-Leader transnational cooperation projects by number of participations



Source: our processing

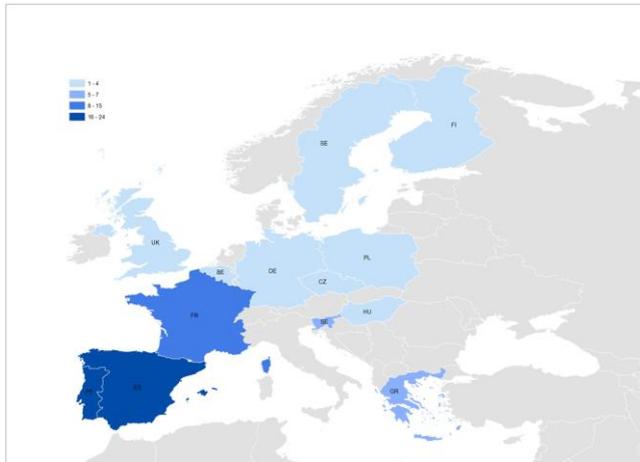
The highest number of participations in projects about Quality of life is 33 and it involves Spain, followed by France with 29, and then United Kingdom with 22, Greece with 21, Slovenia with 17, Germany with 14, and Finland with 12. Finally, the total amount of participations in projects about Tourism is 125: the record goes to Spain again (23 participations) followed by France (21), UK (14), Slovenia (13), Portugal (9), Germany (7), Greece and Sweden (6 participations each).

The number of participations of not European countries in Italian cooperation projects is 51 (see Figure 2.3). The most frequent relationships have been registered with Serbia - Montenegro⁴⁰ (12), Albania (7), Croatia and Switzerland (6 respectively).

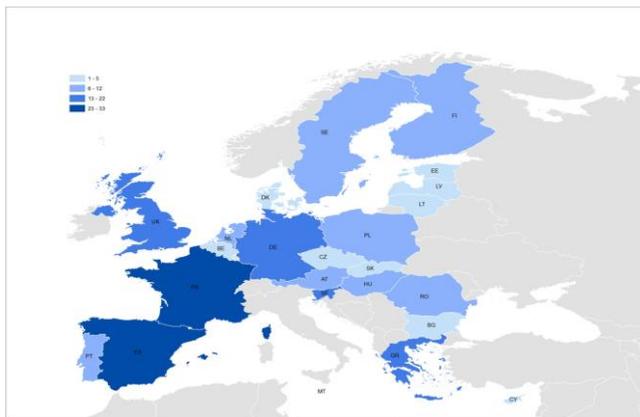
The Quality of life - with 37 participations – represents, even in this case, the main theme; the participations related to cooperation projects on Tourism are 13, while only one participation with the Albanians was registered for the Local products.

⁴⁰ Since 2006, Serbia and Montenegro are officially two distinct states, but in our analysis they were considered as a single institutional and geographical area as some territorial cooperation projects had already been implemented before that date.

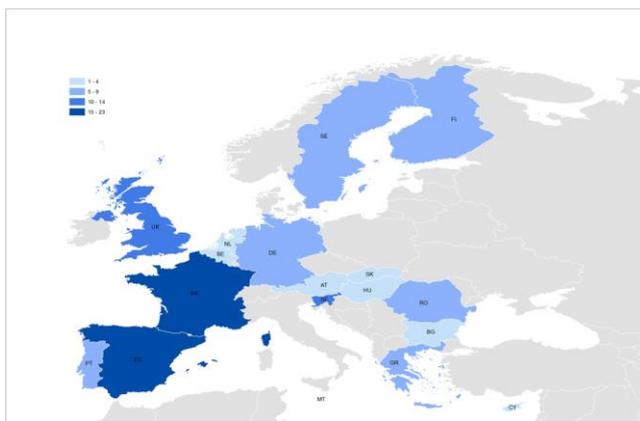
Figure 2.2 – European Union countries involved with Italian LAGs in Leader and extra-Leader transnational cooperation projects, by number of participations and themes (to be continued)



Local Products

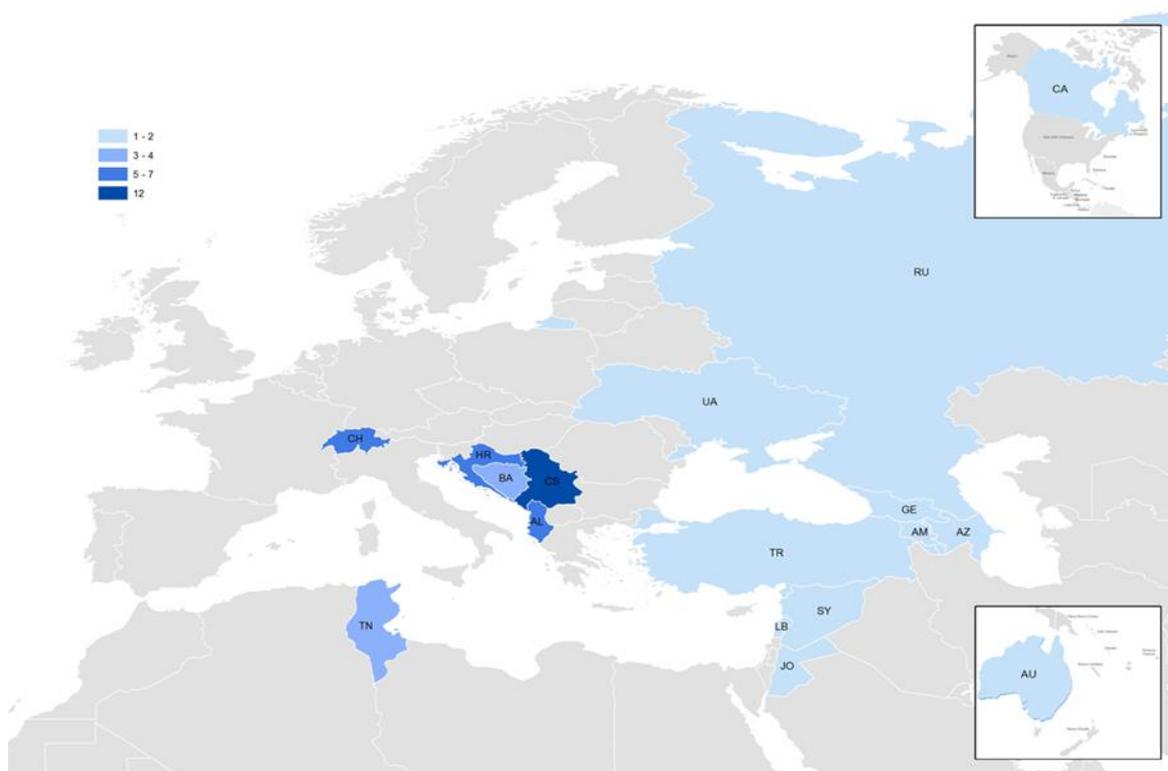


Quality of Life



Tourism

Figure 2.3 – Not European Union countries involved with Italian LAGs in Leader and extra - Leader Transnational Cooperation projects, by number of participations



Source: our processing

2.3. Leader cooperation

2.3.1. *The numbers of cooperation and thematic areas of the LEADER projects*

In the specific context of Leader cooperation 236 projects were registered: 107 of them (45%) belong to the Community Initiative Leader II and, as a consequence, to the programming period 1994-1999, whereas 129 of them refer to the Leader + (55%), thus, to the programming phase 2000-2006.⁴¹

As already mentioned, the instrument of cooperation was introduced in the Leader II programme, which provided technical assistance for the transnational dimension: in such programming phase 255 transnational cooperation actions were funded⁴² at European level, and the 42% of them involved the participation of 203 Italian LAGs.

Within the Community Initiative Leader+, thanks to the introduction of the inter-

⁴¹ It should be noted that the projects related to the 2007-2013 programming period were not taken into consideration because the information in many cases wasn't available or was inadequate.

⁴² See S. Jones, P. Soto (2001), *The transnational cooperation under Leader II. Lessons from the past, tools for Future*, European Observatory Leader, AEIDL, Brussels.

regional cooperation, 132 LAGs took part in 129 cooperation projects, of which 67 were inter-territorial and 62 transnational.

The analysis by subject area highlights that in total – considering both the Leader II and the Leader+ periods – 89 projects concerned Tourism, 85 initiatives aimed at improving Quality of life, and 62 promoted Local products. (see Table 2.3).

The redistribution by issue changed between the Community Initiative Leader II and Leader+. As shown in the Table 2.3, the focus of the projects has shifted from the Local products (decreased from 35 % to 19 % in the two programming periods), to the Quality of life (passing from 30% of the Leader II to 41% of the Leader +) and Tourism (increased from 35.5 % to 39.5 %). Among the reasons of such changes we can point out the adjustments in the strategic guidelines for planning and implementation of Community Initiatives and the evolution of the objectives of cooperation as defined by the Community and/or national guidance documents.

Table 2.3 – Leader II and Leader + Cooperation Projects by theme and sub-theme (absolute values and percentages)

		<i>Leader II</i>	<i>Leader Plus</i>	Total	<i>Leader II</i>	<i>Leader Plus</i>	Total
Local products	Promotion	37	24	61	34.6	18.6	25.8
	Information and awareness raising	0	1	1	0.0	0.8	0.4
Total of Local Products		37	25	62	34.6	19.4	26.3
Quality of life	Cultural activities	0	4	4	0.0	3.1	1.7
	Social cohesion	1	4	5	0.9	3.1	2.1
	Renewable energy	0	1	1	0.0	0.8	0.4
	Land Management	0	1	1	0.0	0.8	0.4
	Recovery of environmental heritage	6	12	18	5.6	9.3	7.6
	Recovery of historical and cultural heritage	11	12	23	10.3	9.3	9.7
	Services	14	19	33	13.1	14.7	14.0
Total of Quality of Life		32	53	85	29.9	41.1	36.0
Tourism	Itineraries	6	9	15	5.6	7.0	6.4
	Tourism promotion	32	42	74	29.9	32.6	31.4
Total of Tourism		38	51	89	35.5	39.5	37.7
TOTAL		107	129	236	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: our processing on National Rural Network database

The analysis of the projects by “sub-theme” highlights the concentration on the theme of “tourism promotion”, with a percentage of about 30% in the two periods considered. The typology of projects is followed by those related to the “promotion of typical products” (35% in Leader II and 19% in Leader +) and those related to “the creation of services” (rising from 13% to 15%, in the two periods).

2.3.2. The index of “dynamism” in Leader projects

To get a measure of the level of participation of the LAGs in project planning and implementation during Leader II and Leader+, we calculated two indicators: the “density of

participation” and “index of dynamism”.

The first indicator provides a quantitative evaluation of the overall participation of LAGs in the cooperation projects; it is given by the sum of the cases in which the LAG assumed the role of leader and / or partner in the projects within Leader II and Leader + (see Table 2.4). The density of participation in the Leader II is 233: 67 LAGs participated in cooperation projects as a lead-partner and 166 as partner. In the Leader +, the density of participation registered 442: 108 were participations as a lead-partner and 334 as a partner.

Table 2.4 – Participation of LAGs in cooperation projects within Leader II and Leader +, by role and thematic area

	<i>Leader II</i>			<i>Leader Plus</i>			<i>Density of participation in LEADER (a+b)</i>
	<i>Lead-partner</i>	<i>Partner</i>	<i>Density of participation (a)</i>	<i>Lead-partner</i>	<i>Partner</i>	<i>Density of participation (b)</i>	
Local Products	26	48	74	21	64	85	159
Quality of Life	19	45	64	43	94	137	201
Tourism	22	73	95	44	176	220	315
Total	67	166	233	108	334	442	675

Source: our processing

The comparison between the two programming periods highlights the following aspects: i) the overall level of participation has almost doubled between the first and second programming period ; ii) the role played by the LAGs – Lead-partner and / or partner - has different characteristics: the LAGs which assumed the role of lead-partner during Leader II represent the 28.4% of the LAGs who participated in cooperation project, while, in the Leader +, this role was performed by one LAG out of four.

The analysis by theme shows a higher density of participation in the cooperation projects related to Tourism: the overall index is equal to 315; in the case of projects on the Quality of life, the indicator takes a value equal to 201 and finally in cooperation projects on Local products it is 159 .

Further information on the interactions between the LAGs in the projects, results from the analysis of the “indicator of dynamism”, which examines the density of participation and the number of cooperation projects. This index represents a measure of the “multiplier effect of cooperation”⁴³: the higher the value of the indicator, the greater the involvement of LAGs in the participation to projects as a leader or as a partner. At the national level the indicator of dynamism is 1.86: that means that each project has created at least two collaborations with other LAGs of the same country .

The same method was used to calculate the density of participation and the index of dynamism with reference to the Leader II and Leader + (see Table 2.5).

⁴³ *The indicator of dynamism was calculated as follows:
$$\frac{\text{indicator of density of participation} - N. \text{ projects}}{N. \text{ projects}}$$*

Table 2.5 – Index of density of participation and index of dynamism in Leader II and Leader +

	<i>Leader II</i>	<i>Leader Plus</i>	<i>LEADER</i>
<i>Density of participation</i>	233	442	675
N. of cooperation projects	107	129	236
<i>Index of Dynamism</i>	1.18	2.24	1.86

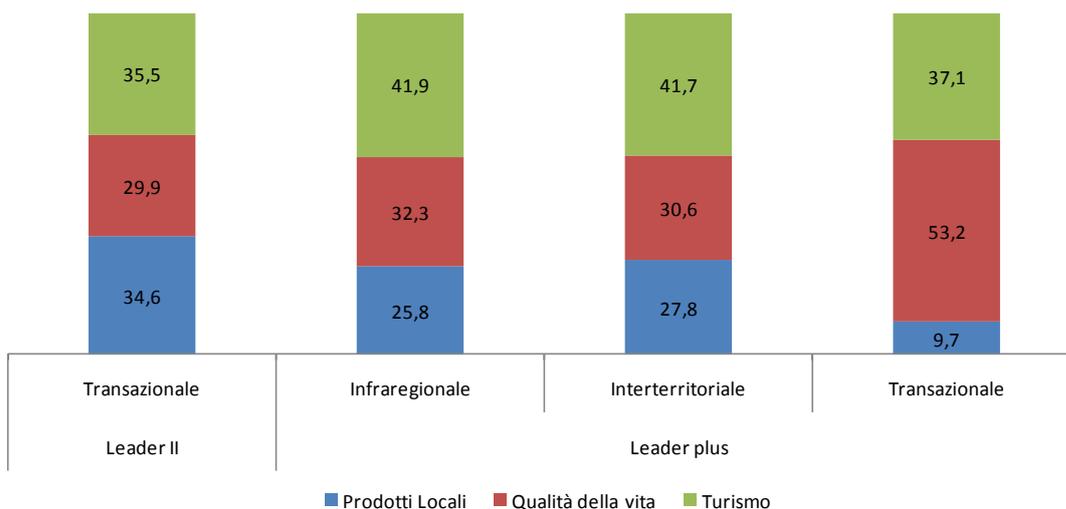
Source: direct investigation

Overall, in the course of the Leader II Initiative were activated 107 projects; the value for the density of participation is equal to 233, and the index of dynamism is 1.18. Regarding the Leader+, starting from the 129 projects and a density of participation of 442, the index assumes a value of 2.43.

The comparison between the two indexes shows that in the transition between the programming period 1994-1999 to that 2000-2006, notwithstanding an increase in the number of projects by only 20 % (from 107 to 129), it was detected a greater density of participation by LAGs in projects, with a more than doubled index of dynamism. In Leader II the experience of transnational cooperation became a defined procedure with specific priorities and in which the number of LAGs involved is more than proportional to the number of projects. During the two programming periods, as mentioned above, the mechanism of cooperation in the Leader programme passed from a transnational dimension, to a three-dimensional instrument (inter-regional, inter-territorial and transnational).

The joint analysis, by type of cooperation and thematic areas, shows that in the case of Leader II, the 35.5% is related to Tourism, 3.6% to Local products and 30% to the Quality of Life. The picture changes in transnational projects during Leader+, when slightly more than half of the projects pertains to the issue of Quality of life, 37% to Tourism and only about 10% to the Local products. However interterritorial projects during Leader+ registered the 40% in Tourism, 30% in Quality of Life and finally, one project of five concerns Local products (see Figure 2.4).

Figure 2.4 – Percentage of Leader II and Leader projects + by subject area and type of cooperation



Source: our processing on databases of Rural Network

2.3.3. The analysis of LEADER projects at regional level

From the analysis of the density of participation at the regional level during the two Community Initiatives (Leader II and Leader +) it emerges a greater dynamism in the Adriatic regions, in particular Puglia, Abruzzo and Marche, where the indicator (which, as already stated, comes out of the sum of all the projects in which the LAG assumes the role of lead-partner or partner) amounts respectively to 65, 63 and 59⁴⁴ (see Table 2.6).

Table 2.6 – Leader II and Leader + : density of participation by Region

	<i>Leader II</i>			<i>Leader Plus</i>			<i>LEADER</i>
	<i>Lead partner</i>	<i>Partner</i>	<i>Density of participation</i>	<i>Lead-partner</i>	<i>Partner</i>	<i>Density of participation</i>	<i>Density of participation</i>
ABRUZZO	3	19	22	8	33	41	63
BASILICATA	4	8	12	5	23	28	40
CALABRIA	5	14	19	7	27	34	53
CAMPANIA	2	9	11	3	19	22	33
EMILIA ROMAGNA	3	13	16	9	20	29	45
FRIULI VENEZIA GIULIA	0	11	11	3	3	6	17
LAZIO	7	12	19	2	10	12	31
LIGURIA	1	3	4	1	6	7	11
LOMBARDIA	2	0	2	6	11	17	19
MARCHE	3	3	6	13	40	53	59
MOLISE	2	2	4	3	7	10	14
PIEMONTE	6	5	11	2	4	6	17
PUGLIA	3	19	22	7	36	43	65
SARDEGNA	3	6	9	4	20	24	33
SICILIA	3	1	4	1	27	28	32
TOSCANA	8	12	20	6	14	20	40
TRENTINO ALTO ADIGE	0	2	2	3	9	12	14
UMBRIA	6	8	14	10	14	24	38
VALLE D'AOSTA	0	2	2	0	4	4	6
VENETO	6	17	23	15	7	22	45
ITALY	67	166	233	108	334	442	675

Source: our processing

The Regions that recorded the lowest levels of participation are Valle d'Aosta - with a total of 6 participations - and Liguria with 11. The Figure 2.5 presents a map showing the density of participation by Region, in particular, five classes have been defined according to the value taken by the indicator examined.

The comparative analysis between the two programming periods highlights a substantial increase in the density of participation in the Marche region: in the programming period 1994-1999 the number of participations, in which the LAGs of Marche Region assumed the role of

⁴⁴ The Autonomous Province of Trento and Bolzano have been grouped together under the heading "Trentino Alto Adige".

lead partner or partner, are only 6, while in the 2000-2006 programming period are 53. The Regions that are characterized by a decrease in the density of regional participation between 1994-1999 and 2000-2006 are: Lazio (-7), Friuli Venezia Giulia and Piemonte (-5 in both cases)

Figure 2.5 – Density of participation of LAGs in LEADER cooperation projects by Region



Source: our processing

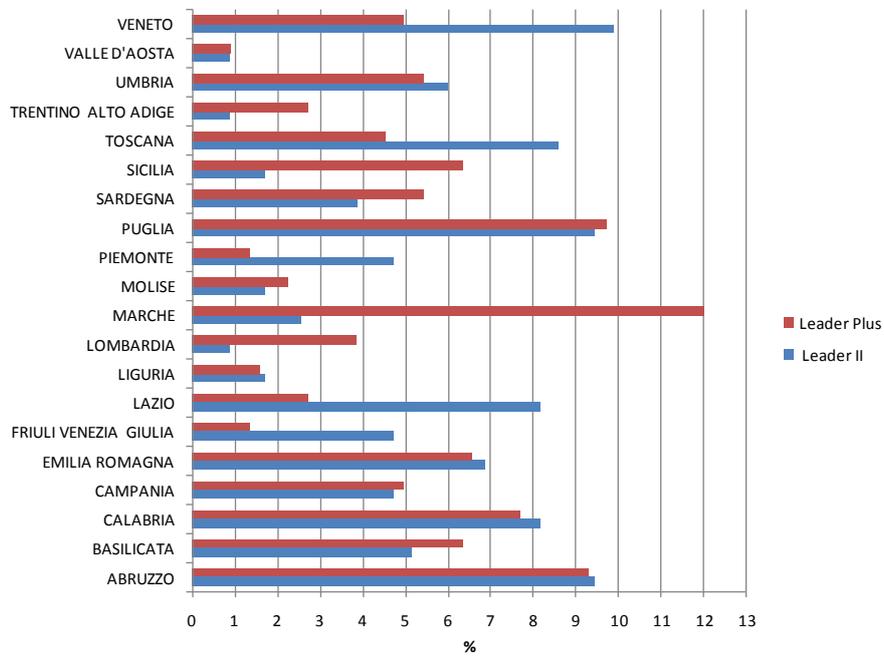
To detect the “*prominence*” of each Region in project planning during Leader II and Leader +, either as a lead-partner or as a partner, it was calculated in percentage the impact of the participations activated at the regional level on the total of the participations detected in each programme (see Figure 2.6).

The Regions which rank in the first positions in both cases (second and third) of the scale are Puglia and Abruzzo with an incidence of 9%. The Veneto Region stands in the first position in the case of Leader II, while Lombardia ranks the last place. The situation changes in Leader+; Marche Region, as we said, is characterized by an increase in the number of participations between the two programming periods, leads the classification, whereas Valle d'Aosta, Friuli Venezia Giulia and Piemonte occupy the last positions.

Important insights emerge from the regional analysis of the number of participations according to the “*role*” assumed by the LAGs. The projects in which the LAGs have assumed the role of lead-partner are 175 in total, of which 67 within Leader II, and 108 within Leader +. The 12% (equal to 21 in absolute terms) of Leader projects (Leader II and Leader +) were activated in Veneto, 9% in Umbria, a similar percentage in Marche and 8% in Toscana (see Figure 2.7).

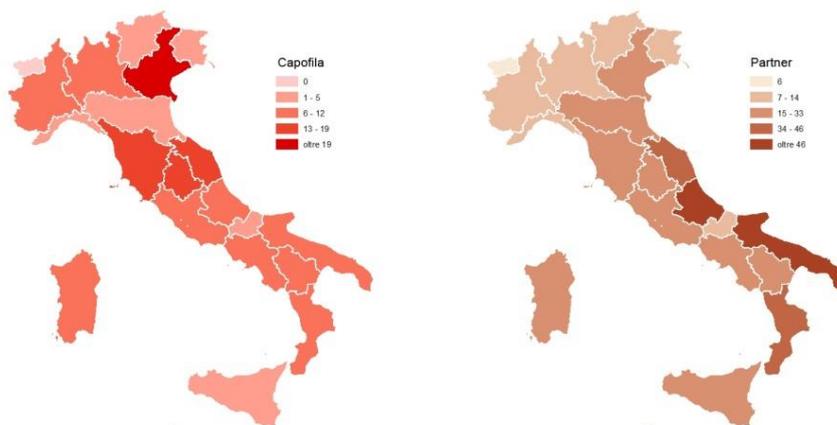
Valle d'Aosta is the only region with no LAGs as lead-partners, followed by Liguria (one project) and Trentino Alto Adige (3 projects).

Figure 2.6 – Leader II and Leader + : the % incidence of the participations in cooperation projects by Region



Source: our processing

Figure 2.7 – Participation of the LAGs in LEADER cooperation projects as lead-partner or partner by Region



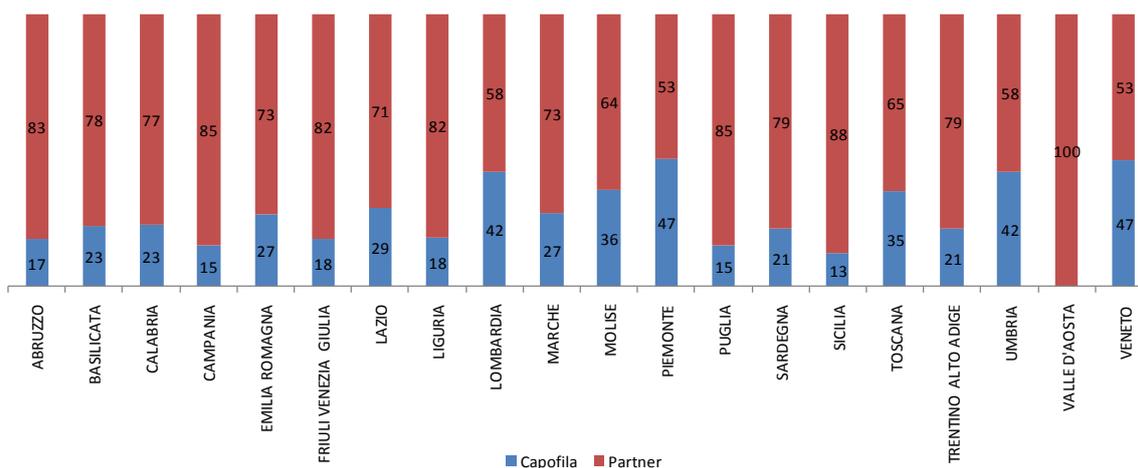
Source: our processing

The participations of LAGs as partners are 500, of which 166 are related to Leader II and 334 to Leader+. 11% of them (thus 55 participations) has been registered in Puglia, 10% (52 in absolute terms) in Abruzzo, 8.6% (43) in Marche and 8.1% in Calabria (41). As it can be seen

also from the analysis of Figure 2.7 in many regions the number of the participations in which the LAGs are partners is between 7 and 14.

To get a more detailed picture at the regional level it has been calculated the incidence of participations in percentage according to the “role” (lead-partner or partner) compared to the total of the participations recorded in each region (see Figure 2.8). As mentioned above, Valle d’Aosta is the only Region where there are only projects with LAGs in the role of partners.

Figure 2.8 – % incidence of the participations of the LAGs in Leader II and Leader +, projects by role (lead-partner or partner) and Region



Source: our processing

In Veneto, Piemonte, Lombardia and Umbria it was detected a “balance” between the number of the LAGs participating in projects as lead-partners or partners; in the other Regions a greater participation has been noted as a partner (higher than 70 %).

Furthermore, it was investigated the ability of the LAGs to create cooperative relationships at infra-regional, inter-territorial and transnational level; to do that it has been considered the number of participations activated at the regional level by type of cooperation (see Table 2.7).

The infra-regional participations are 111, all relating to the Leader + programme; of these, 43 were carried out by LAGs operating in Marche (38.7%), 16 in Umbria (14.4%), 12 in Sardinia (10.8%). During the Leader + programme the infra-regional participation in projects was minimal for many of the Italian Regions, particularly in northern Italy.

The participations in inter-territorial projects are 153; Basilicata (with 18 participations, is equal to 11.8% of total participations), Puglia (with 17 participations), Abruzzo (15 participations, 9.8%), Sicily (7.2%), Emilia Romagna (6.5%) and Veneto (6.2%) adopted this type of cooperation. Low density of participations was observed in the Tyrrhenian area (Tuscany, Lazio and Sardinia) with an incidence of about 2%.

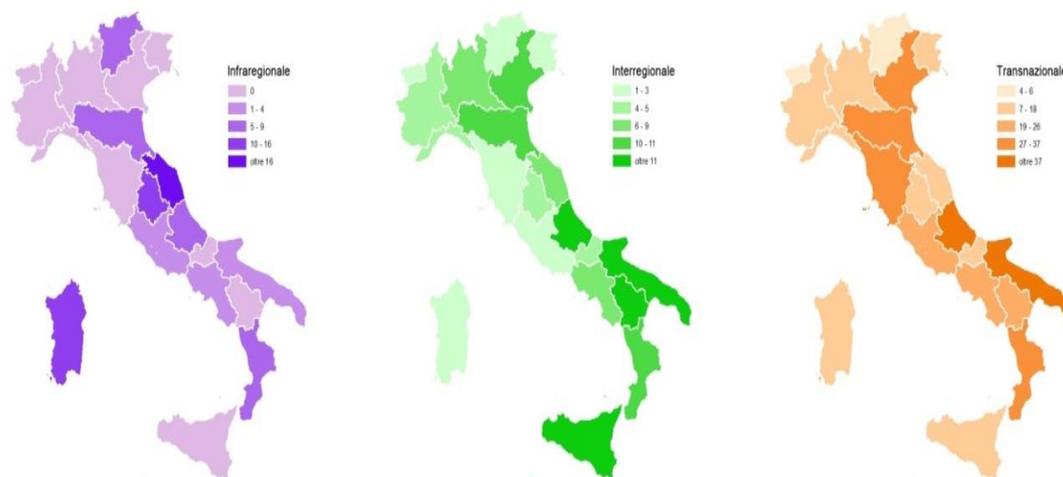
Finally, the participations in transnational projects related to the two programming periods are 411, of which 233 related to Leader II and 178 to Leader+. The most “dynamic” Regions in this case are: Puglia, with 44 participations (10.7%); Abruzzo, with 40 (9.7%); Tuscany, with 37 (9 %), Veneto and Calabria, respectively, with 35 and 34 participations; Emilia Romagna, with 28 (see figure 2.9).

Table 2.7 – Number of participations in Leader II and Leader+ cooperation by Region and type of cooperation (absolute values)

	Transnational			Infra-regional	Inter-territorial
	Leader II	Leader Plus	LEADER		
ABRUZZO	22	18	40	8	15
BASILICATA	12	10	22	0	18
CALABRIA	19	16	35	8	10
CAMPANIA	11	10	21	3	9
EMILIA ROMAGNA	16	12	28	7	10
FRIULI VENEZIA GIULIA	11	5	16	0	1
LAZIO	19	6	25	3	3
LIGURIA	4	3	7	0	4
LOMBARDIA	2	9	11	0	8
MARCHE	6	1	7	43	9
MOLISE	4	6	10	0	4
PIEMONTE	11	1	12	0	5
PUGLIA	22	22	44	4	17
SARDEGNA	9	9	18	12	3
SICILIA	4	14	18	0	14
TOSCANA	20	17	37	0	3
TRENTINO ALTO ADIGE	2	3	5	7	2
UMBRIA	14	3	17	16	5
VALLE D'AOSTA	2	2	4	0	2
VENETO	23	11	34	0	11
ITALIA	233	178	411	111	153

Source: our processing

Figure 2.9 – Participation of LAGs in Leader cooperation projects by Region and type cooperation



Source: our processing on NRN database

2.4. Extra-Leader cooperation

2.4.1. The numbers of extra-Leader cooperation projects and their themes

From the *field* survey that involved the LAGs, currently present on the national territory, and thanks to the “desk” analysis and reference lists of websites which allowed the census of the projects, it was found that the number of extra-Leader cooperation projects is 95 (see Table 2.8). Of these, 61 projects (64.2 % of the total) concern the improvement of Quality of Life, 21 the promotion of Tourism and 13 the Local Products.

Table 2.8 – Extra-Leader cooperation projects by theme and sub-theme

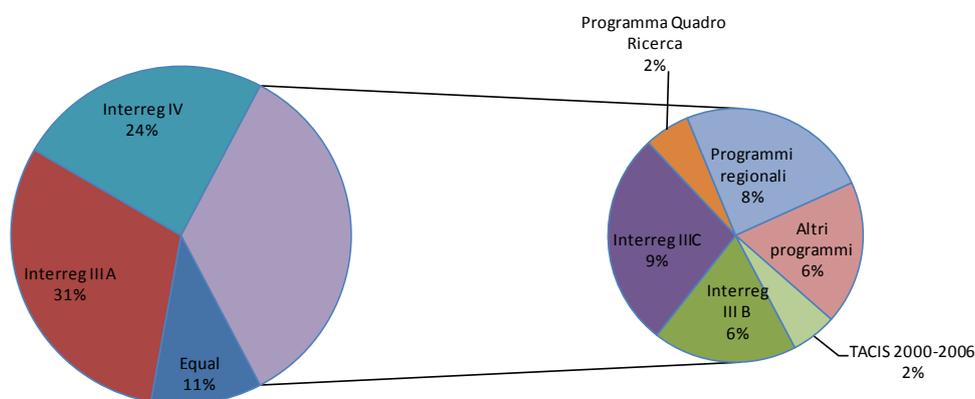
		Absolute value	%
Local Products	Promotion of local products	9	9.47
	Information and awareness raising	4	4.21
	Total of Local Products	13	13.68
Quality of life	Cultural activities	2	2.11
	Social cohesion	15	15.79
	Renewable energy	1	1.05
	Land management	1	1.05
	Recovery of environmental heritage	12	12.63
	Recovery of historical and cultural heritage	4	4.21
	Services	26	27.37
	Total of Quality of life	61	64.21
Tourism	Itineraries	6	6.32
	Tourism promotion	15	15.79
	Total of Tourism	21	22.11
Total		95	100

Source: our processing of databases, other sources and direct investigation

The programmes analysed are the following (see Figure 2.10):

- Interreg III: of which 28 projects concerning the Community Initiative Interreg III A, 6 concerning the Interreg B and 9 Interreg C
- Interreg IV: 23 projects
- Equal: 10 projects
- VI and VII Framework Programme : 2 projects
- TACIS 2000-2006: 2 projects
- National and regional laws: Law 212 MAE (1 project), the Regional Law of Friuli Venezia Giulia n.19 of 30 October 2000 (2 projects), Puglia Regional Law n.23-2000 (3 projects), POR 2000-2006 (1 project), Project Former Article 7 Law 84/2001(1 project)
- Other programmes: Prices APQ Balkans (1 project), Prince EU- DG Ecofin (1 project)ENPI (1 project), Leonardo Programme(1 project), IFAD (1 project).

Figure 2.10 – LAGs and territorial cooperation. Extra-Leader cooperation projects by type of financing programme



Source: our processing of data sources and direct investigation

2.4.2. The index of dynamism in Extra-Leader cooperation projects

In order to measure the level of participation of the LAGs in extra-Leader projects, it was determined the density of “participation” and calculated the “index of dynamism”⁴⁵, as it was done for the Leader projects. The density of participation, as illustrated previously, considered how many times each LAG took part in extra-Leader projects as a partner or lead-partner. The density of participation in this case has a value of 114: in 21 cases the LAGs participate as lead-partner and in 93 as a partner.

In particular, of the 21 participations as a lead-partner, 38% (8 in absolute terms) concerned the sub-theme of “social cohesion”, 19% focused on the “services” and a similar percentage on the “Promotion”, whereas 14% was about “Information and awareness raising” (see Figure 2.11).

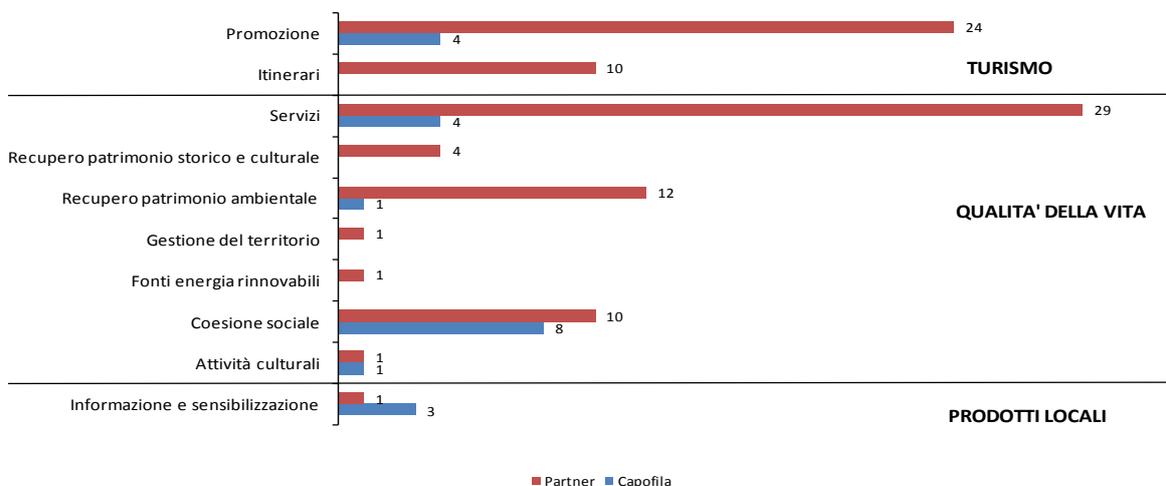
With reference to the 93 participations as a partner, 31% is related to the “services”, the 26% to “promotion”, 13% to “recovery of the environmental heritage”, 11% to “social cohesion” and in equal measure to the issue of “itineraries”.

The index of dynamism⁴⁶, as shown in the paragraph 2.3.2, considers the density of participation and the number of projects, and it registered in total 0.2; this number shows how the multiplier effect of the participations of the LAGs in extra-Leader projects is, to all intents and purposes, still underused if compared to the resources, skills and potential of the LAGs. The programmatic approach and the priorities of the other funding programmes do not foresee the direct and compulsory involvement of the LAGs, thus their participation to extra-Leader projects is the signal of a strategy oriented to expand the areas of intervention and its own mission. In particular, it concerns LAGs that have gained experience in the framework of the Leader projects, and intends to consolidate their business by planning and managing new territorial programmes and searching for new financial resources.

⁴⁵ See paragraph 2.3.2.

⁴⁶ See the Note 10.

Figure 2.11 – Extra-Leader cooperation projects by theme, sub-theme and by role of the LAGs (absolute values)



Source: our processing of databases, other sources and direct investigation

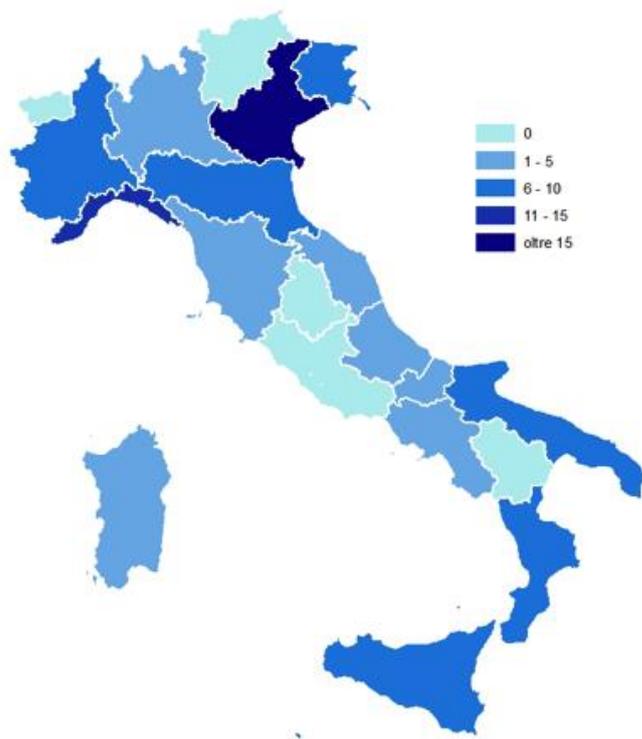
In these cases, such LAGs take part in the partnerships of extra-Leader projects and act as regular local agencies for the land development. This fact means that they define, plan and implement interventions, aimed at the development and growth of the reference territory, and expand the thematic areas defined by the Leader programme. It is, therefore, an improvement, a further structuring that requires investments, consolidation of business procedures and expertise, long-term perspective, as well as capacity of fund-raising in order to expand the areas of intervention and ensure the financial sustainability of the agency itself.

2.4.3. The analysis of extra-Leader projects at regional level

The Regions where LAGs act with greater participation in the extra-Leader programmes - as a lead partner or partner, are Veneto (with 30 participations), Liguria (15), Emilia Romagna (10), Friuli Venezia Giulia (9) and Puglia (8) (see Figure 2.12); this is partly related to their geographic location, since these areas are in proximity of the Italy-Slovenia Programme. In Basilicata, Lazio, Umbria and Valle d’Aosta extra-Leader cooperation projects were not identified.

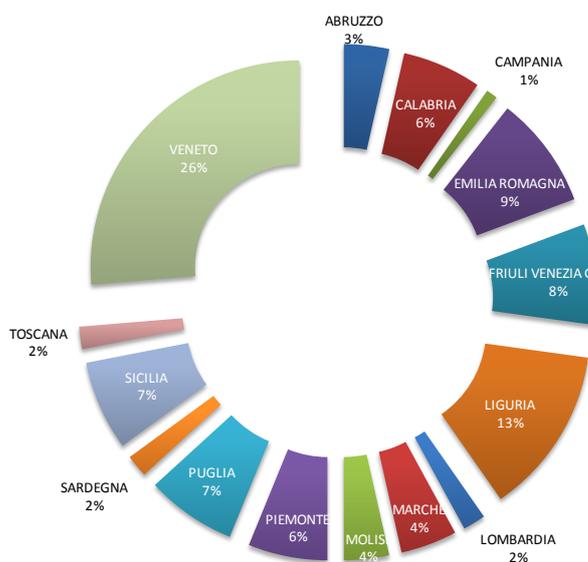
The density of participation is also confirmed by the analysis of the number of participations detected in every region on the total of participations (see Figure 2.13): the 26% concerns the LAGs in Veneto, 15% in Liguria, 9% in Emilia Romagna, 8% in Friuli Venezia Giulia and the 7% in Puglia. On the contrary, Campania registered 1% of all participations, followed by Lombardia, Sardinia and Tuscany, which respectively represent 2 %.

Figure 2.12 – Density of participation of LAGs in extra-Leader cooperation projects by Region



Source: our processing of databases, other sources and direct investigation

Figure 2.13 – Involvement of the LAGs in extra-Leader cooperation projects by Region (%)

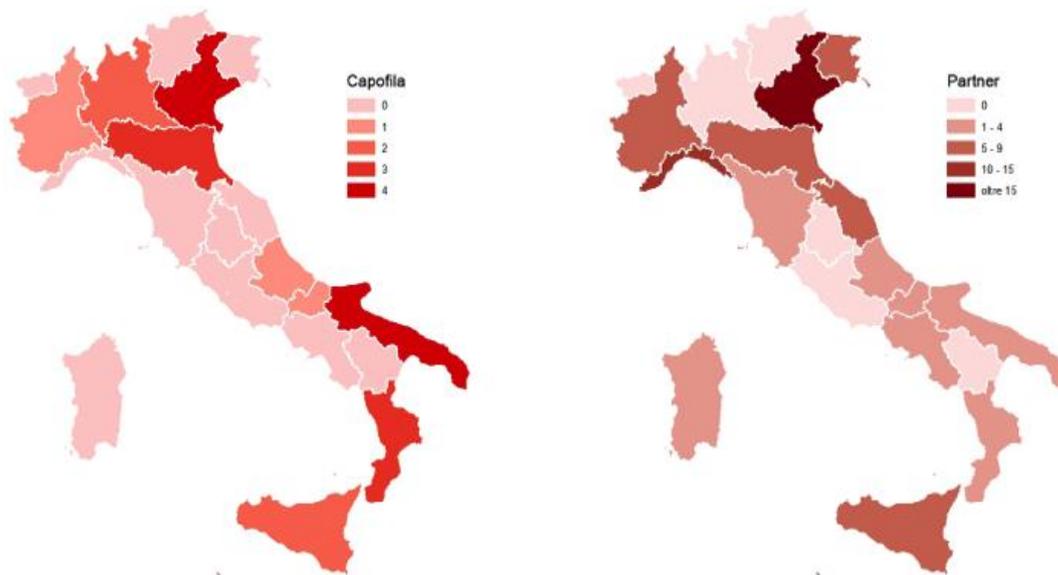


Source: our processing of databases, other sources and direct investigation

The greater dynamism in project planning and the ability of managing the projects that distinguishes the LAGs operating in the territories of Friuli Venezia Giulia, Veneto and Emilia

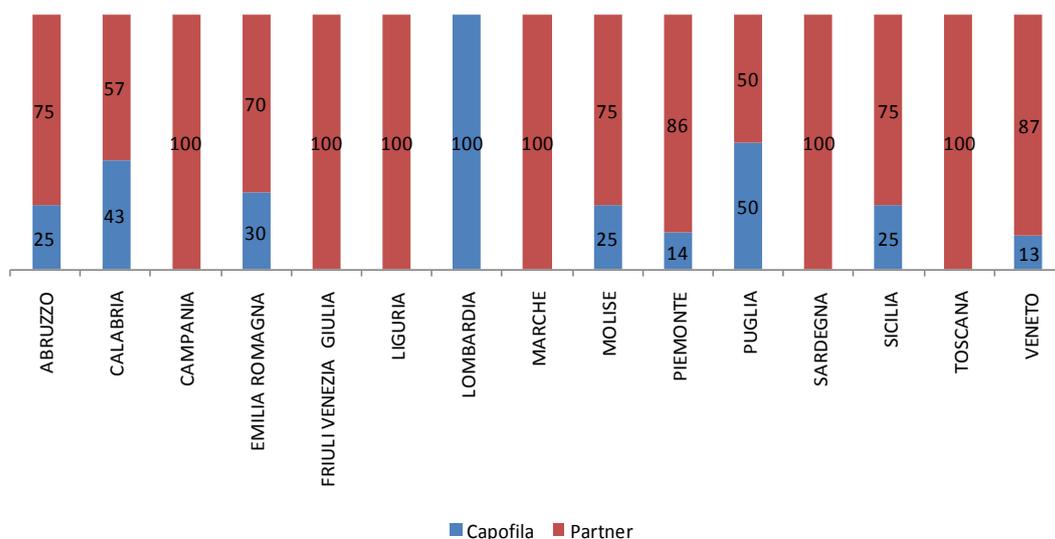
Romagna, is also confirmed by the analysis of the role of the LAGs (lead partner or partner) in the extra-Leader projects. On 21 cases in which the LAGs have assumed the status of lead-partner, 4 are located in Veneto and a similar share is registered in Puglia (see Figure 2.14); on 93 participations as partner, 26 (28%) are in the Veneto, 15 in Liguria, 9 in Friuli Venezia Giulia and 7 in Emilia Romagna.

Figure 2.14 – Participation of LAGs in extra-Leader cooperation projects as lead-partner and as a partner by Region



Source: our processing of databases, other sources and direct investigation

Figure 2.15 – % incidence of participation of the LAGs in extra-Leader cooperation projects by role (lead-partner or partner) and Region



Source: our processing of databases, other sources and direct investigation

An analysis of the percentage incidence of the number of participations as lead partner or partner on the total participations identified at regional level shows that Lombardia is the only Region where the LAGs have, therefore, assumed the role of lead-partner; the Regions where the LAGs participated only as partners in extra-Leader projects are Marche, Campania, Liguria, Sardinia and Tuscany. The Regions where the distribution between the two roles is almost homogeneous are Puglia and Calabria (see Figure 2.15).

2.5. Indicators and index of territorial cooperation

2.5.1. Methodology

The purpose of this paragraph, as reported in par. 2.1.3, is to provide a synthetic vision that allows to define, in a logic of *benchmarking*⁴⁷, the most evident elements of dynamism in cooperation for the LAGs. The main aim was to create a scale for comparison in reference to the level of cooperation of the LAGs analysed, highlighting the best performing ones and providing considerations for further reflections.

The positioning maps, shown in the following paragraphs, come out after the definition of a metric parameter in order to facilitate the interpretation of the synthesis: the so-called **Index of cooperation**.

In order to build the index of cooperation of the LAGs three key dimensions were considered in relation to the objectives of the analysis:

1. The number of cooperation projects for each LAG;
2. The qualitative characteristics of the participation (such as the leader role performed in the projects, the participation in transnational projects, the participation in extra-Leader programmes);
3. The size of the partnership arising from the number of partners involved in projects, by distinguishing the roles between close partners (regional and national) and foreign partners.

To obtain a synthetic measure relating to every single factor mentioned above three indicators were defined:

a) Indicator of project planning (indprog): The indicator derives from a normalization process by applying the following formula:

$$\text{indprog} = (n. \text{proj} - n. \text{proj} . \text{min}) / (n. \text{proj} \text{ max} - n. \text{proj} \text{ min})$$

⁴⁷ The benchmarking analysis, born at the beginning of the 80, have been used in management to identify the competitive levers in an industry. Such analysis: i) study the positioning of organizations in terms of certain keys aspects; ii) identify the drivers of the sector and the organizations that operate efficiently and effectively. The purpose of the benchmarking is to build a "constructive comparison" between the organizations observed to highlight the "best" organizational realities and provide learning processes or exchange knowledge with the less brilliant organizations.

This parameter takes into account the number of projects with the LAGs examined in the current analysis. The value of the indicator is between 0 and 1: it is 1 for the LAGs that recorded the highest number of participations in cooperation projects and 0 for the LAGs with the minor amount of participations.

b) Indicator of quality (indqual): three variables have been taken into account in order to define an indicator for the measurement of the quality of cooperation: i) the role played by the LAGs as lead-partner; ii) the participation in transnational projects; iii) the participation in extra-Leader programmes. The indicator was made up by assigning more weight to the first variable, since it represents the role and the organizational capacity of LAGs in the project planning. For each of the three variables, the 4 clusters identified allow the classification the LAGs on the basis of the incidence of verifiability of the variable. The range was built taking into account the average, and its values are proportional to the standard deviation. Adding together the individual values obtained and considering the different weight given to the three variables (0.8 to the lead-partner role , 0.2 for transnational projects, 0.4 for extra-Leader projects), it was found an indicator of cooperation quality. The indicator, in this way calculated, was subsequently normalized using the same formula described for the indicator of project planning.

c) Indicators of involvement (indcoinv): this indicator is determined on the basis of the average number of partners involved in the projects, allocating more weight to the presence of foreign actors. Also in this case, we refer to a normalized indicator.

After the calculation of the three indicators it was calculated the index of cooperation through the following methodology :

$$\text{Index of Cooperation} = (\text{indprog}) + (\text{indqual} \times 0.4) + (0.2 \times \text{indcoinv})$$

As emerged from the formula, it has been assigned a greater weight to the ability of participation in cooperation projects (indprog) in order to highlight the LAG's dynamism, without neglecting, nonetheless, the quality and the involvement of the partnership that have the task to rebalance the weight according to the role assumed by the LAGs (lead-partner or partner), also by measuring the presence of Italian and foreign partners.

2.5.2. The most dynamic LAGs

The table below shows the ranking of the most "dynamic" LAGs, which registered an index of cooperation superior to 0.5⁴⁸.

The LAGs Venezia Orientale and Delta 2000 occupy the first and second position with an index of cooperation of 1.35 and 1.02 respectively. The average value of the index of cooperation, calculated on the 215 LAGs surveyed, amounts to 0.27. This factor shows a different propensity for territorial cooperation by LAGs.

The primacy of the LAG Venezia Orientale is ascribable to an excellent index of project

48 For a complete overview of the Italian LAGs and the cooperation projects of this programming period, see the website of the National Rural Network, where you can find a specific session dedicated to this study (www.reterurale.it).

planning, with a value of 1.00, that is higher than the average value 0.09. The LAGs with a relevant value in the indicator of quality, which at national level is 0.34, are two: the LAG Isola Salento and the LAG Monte Poro (1.00). With reference to the indicator of involvement, among the most dynamic LAGs emerges the LAG Isola Salento with an indicator of 0.68 while the average value stands at 0.21. If we analyse all of the 215 LAGs, the primacy belongs to the LAG "Terre di Marca" with a value of the index of involvement equal to 1.00.

An in depth-analysis of the most "dynamic" LAGs, shows that, the higher indicators were recorded in the northern regions' LAGs, where the average value of the index of cooperation - counting only the first 21 LAGs - is equal 0.76 (see Figure 2.16). The indicator of project planning shows a lower ability in the South and in the islands, where the average value is equal to 0.20 and 0.17; in the North, the indicator registers a double value (0.40), with the LAG Venezia Orientale (1.00), the LAG Delta 2000 (0.65) and the LAG Appennino Genovese (0.55) which obtained values above average.

The islands recorded the higher average value of the indicator of quality (0.93); such a figure is influenced by the fact that only two LAGs (Eloro and Ogliastra) are present in the group.

The "quality of the project planning", however, is fairly relevant even in other areas of the country and the performance of the LAGs exceed the average of the benchmark group (0.79) in several cases, from north to south: GAL Marsica (0.81); LAG Oglio Po "Terre d'acqua" (0.9) ; LAG Eloro (0.95); LAG Polesine Delta del Po (0.9); LAG Mongioie (0.89); LAG Isola Salento (1.00); LAG Alto Belluno (0.95); LAG Farmaremma (0.81); LAG Monte Poro (1.00) and LAG Ogliastra (0.90) .

In the benchmark group considered, the indicator of involvement assumes an average value (0.24), in line with the national value (0.20).

Table 2.9 – Index of Cooperation and index of project planning, quality and involvement of “dynamic” LAGs (index of cooperation > 0.5)

N°	LAG	Indicator of project planning	Indicator of quality	Indicator of involvement	Index of cooperation
1	GAL Venezia Orientale	1.00	0.76	0.24	1.35
2	GAL Delta 2000	0.66	0.76	0.31	1.02
3	GAL Marsica	0.59	0.81	0.19	0.95
4	GAL Appennino Genovese	0.55	0.43	0.49	0.82
5	GAL Montefeltro	0.52	0.67	0.08	0.8
6	GAL Colli Esini San Vicino	0.41	0.67	0.1	0.7
7	GAL Oglio Po terre d'acqua	0.21	0.9	0.38	0.65
8	GAL Eloro	0.21	0.95	0.21	0.63
9	GAL Capo S Maria di Leuca	0.28	0.76	0.25	0.63
10	GAL Meridaunia	0.38	0.48	0.28	0.63
11	GAL Polesine Delta del Po	0.14	0.9	0.44	0.59
12	GAL Piceno	0.41	0.38	0.07	0.58
13	GAL Mongioie	0.21	0.86	0.15	0.58
14	GAL Alto Salento	0.24	0.67	0.35	0.58
15	GAL SOPRIP	0.28	0.62	0.16	0.56
16	GAL Trasimeno Orvietano	0.31	0.57	0.03	0.55
17	GAL Isola Salento	0.00	1.00	0.68	0.54
18	GAL Alto Bellunese	0.14	0.95	0.06	0.53
19	GAL Farmaremma	0.17	0.81	0.15	0.53
20	GAL Monte Poro	0.10	1.00	0.12	0.53
21	GAL Ogliastra	0.14	0.9	0.12	0.52
<hr/>					
	NORD-OCCIDENTALE*	0.05	0.37	0.17	0.24
	NORD-ORIENTALE**	0.13	0.38	0.23	0.33
	CENTRALE***	0.12	0.41	0.19	0.32
	MERIDIONALE****	0.09	0.30	0.20	0.25
	INSULARE	0.05	0.30	0.25	0.22
<hr/>					
	Italia	0.09	0.34	0.21	0.27

* Piemonte, Valle D'Aosta, Liguria, Lombardia

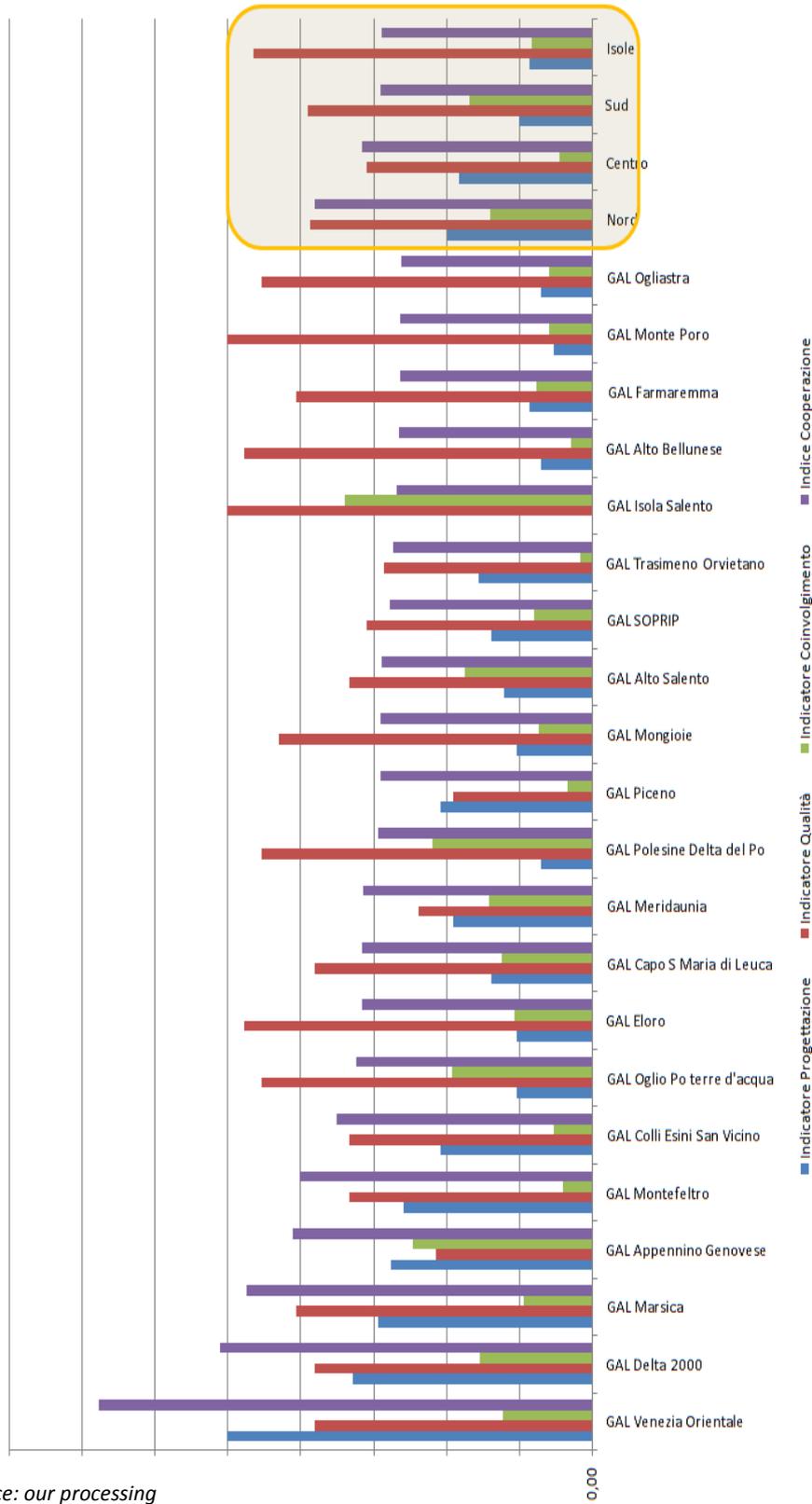
**Trentino Alto Adige, Veneto, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Emilia Romagna

*** Marche, Toscana, Umbria, Lazio

**** Campania, Abruzzo, Molise, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria

Source: our processing of other sources and indirect investigation

Figure 2.16 – Comparison of the indicators for the first 21 LAGs of the benchmark group



Source: our processing

2.5.3. Analysis of the placement

For the benchmarking analysis, we designed the “matrix of placement” which is the result of a dual analysis of the variables taken into account for the formulation of the index of cooperation (indicator of quality, indicator of project planning, indicator of involvement). It consists of dispersion maps useful to map the LAGs according to the value of these indicators, which, besides representing the state of the art for the period considered (2000-2012) allow to detect the critical elements in order to improve the current status. Furthermore, this analysis represents the starting point for the identification of the “case studies”, so as to observe the approaches, the institutional and organizational aspects, as well as the their evolution and make reflections on the *governance* for the future.

The following figure represents a classic positioning matrix in two dimensions, thus representing along the x-axis and the ordinate axis their own minimum and maximum value. In this specific case, there will be represented, in a dual comparison, the indicators considered. In our study, based on this approach, three maps of bi-dimensional approach have been represented, derived from the intersection of the three indicators analysed to measure the levels of dynamism of the LAGs in cooperation.

Figure 2.17 – Positioning matrix based on two dimensions

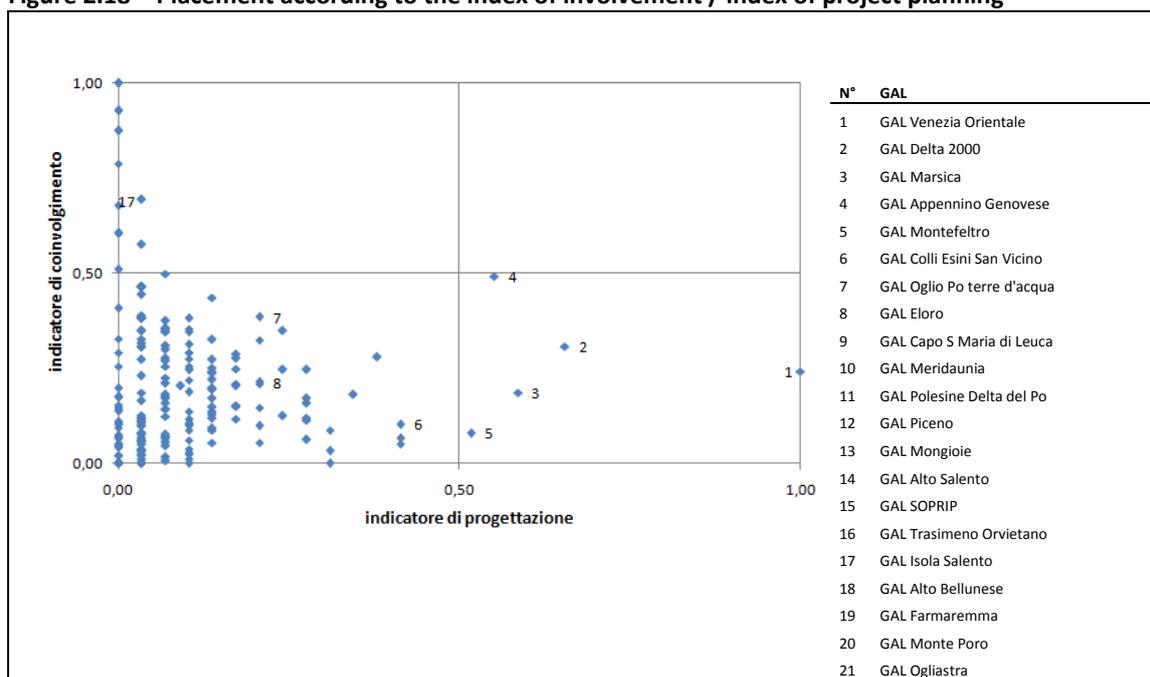


Source: Our processing

In the first map (see Figure 2.18) the indicator of project planning crosses the indicator of involvement. It is a representation of the propensity of LAGs for cooperation and takes into account the participation in cooperation projects and the number of partners involved: a significant number of participations and “large” partnerships with the involvement of foreign partners, are the two strategic variables of a governance system oriented to the enlargement, both for project planning and partnership. The start-up of cooperative processes for the definition and implementation of strategies for the local development mainly with groups and institutions operating both in European and extra-European countries allows to learn new development strategies from other regions and countries, acquire and enhance skills for the project planning and implementation.

The first important datum to be highlighted is the lack of LAGs in the so called “TOP” quadrant. In this case, the LAG Appennino Genovese is placed slightly below the border value between the intermediate quadrant and the most performing quadrant, whereas the other LAGs have recorded lower scores.

Figure 2.18 – Placement according to the index of involvement / index of project planning



Source: our processing of database, other sources and direct investigation

In particular, the LAG Venezia Orientale that registers a high score for the indicator of project planning in this analysis of placement is negatively affected by the indicator of involvement that does not assume significant values, due to a low average number of partners.

The low level of involvement is evident in many LAGs and in particular in those that are placed in the top positions with respect to the index of cooperation. In this case, the first 5 LAGs are placed in the MEDIUM quadrant, despite the high number of projects. In the weaker quadrant most of the LAGs analysed are placed, including some of the most dynamic LAGs. The weakness, highlighted by the intersection of the two indicators, shows that the majority of the Italian LAGs is still weak in terms of partnership, both for the number of projects and for the involvement of external partners. In order to improve the levels of performance - if it is necessary- it should be increased the level of participation of LAGs into projects, by supporting partnerships with a higher involvement of partners.

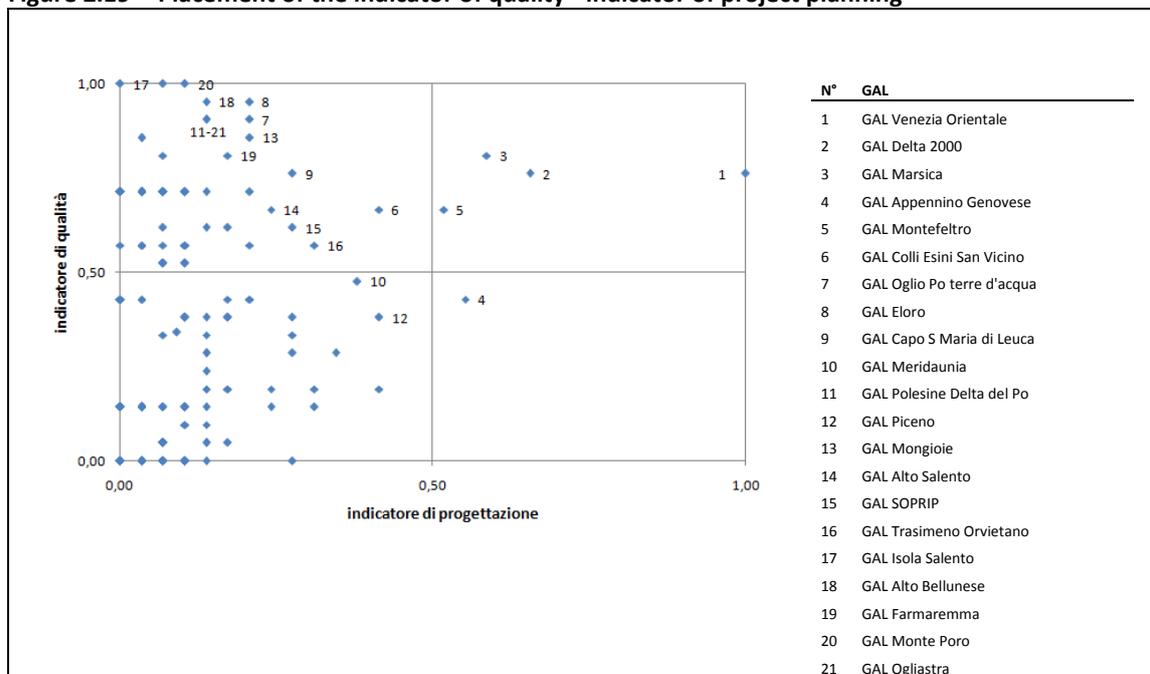
This representation does not reveal, however, the quality of planning but on reverse, focusing on numbers, this could depict the level of complexity for the management of the initiatives. The higher is the number of projects and partners involved, the more complex will be the implementation of the activities.

In other words, the positioning into the “TOP” quadrant of the matrix might cause difficulties on management for the LAGs that, in this perspective, choose to maintain high levels of cooperation without facing the complexity for the management that the involvement of a large number of partners would entail.

The second map derives from the comparison between the indicator of quality and the indicator of project planning (see Figure 2.19). This crossing aims to analyse the connection between the quality of cooperation that, as already highlighted, takes into account the role and the organizational capacity of the LAGs in promoting and managing extra-Leader cooperation projects and/or transnational projects as lead-partner, along with the overall

number of projects in which the LAGs took part. Relevant values, both for the indicator of quality and for the project planning, characterize the LAGs that, in their evolution path, have implemented/are implementing strategic and organizational projects in which the crucial variables are identified in the leadership, so in the role as lead-partner, in addition to the ability in planning, implementing and coordinating a relevant number of projects not only in Leader but also in extra-Leader and transnational cooperation.

Figure 2.19 – Placement of the indicator of quality - indicator of project planning



Source: our processing of database, other sources and direct investigation

As shown in the map, in the intermediate quadrant – reduced levels of planning (below 0.5) and good performance as regards the quality levels (higher than 0.5) – have placed most of the LAGs surveyed in the benchmark considered, together with a large group of LAGs analyzed.

In the “LOW” quadrant, there are many other LAGs which didn’t achieve relevant performance in terms of quality and planning including 2 of the first 20 LAGs analysed: the LAG Meridaunia and the LAG Piceno, despite their overall good performance.

Compared to these two indicators, 4 of the top 5 “dynamic” LAGs analysed in the benchmark are positioned within the quadrant with the best performance (TOP). They are the LAG Venezia Orientale, the LAG Delta 2000, the LAG Marsica and LAG Montefeltro which geographically represent the North-East of the country. The successful elements of these 4 LAGs are many:

- Regions of the Adriatic area (Veneto, Emilia-Romagna , Marche and Abruzzo) have a propensity for international cooperation confirmed by the analysis of the participation of such Regions to several international cooperation programmes (Italy -Slovenia, Adriatic Cross-Border, CADSES) ;

- proven experience in policies for territorial development: the LAG Venezia Orientale was founded in 1995, the LAG Delta 2000 in 1996, the LAG Marsica and Montefeltro

respectively in 1994 and in 1996;

– strong connection with the territory as a “development agency”: in 15 years of activity, the 4 LAGs have expanded their functions by operating on the territory as development agencies, thus being actively engaged in the project planning, in the implementation and realization of the Leader Programme, as well as of the other territorial policies.

The LAG Appennino Genovese, which in the classification of the index of cooperation is at the fourth position, in the positioning matrix of Figure 2.19 is located just below the line dividing the TOP and the MEDIUM quadrant, with a slightly lower performance for the indicator of quality. The LAG Colli Esini San Vicino is in a similar situation, recording a performance slightly below the average of the LAGs placed in the TOP quadrant with regard to the indicator of the project planning. The passage from an intermediate quadrant to a TOP quadrant, depends on the number of projects to be activated, maintaining the same conditions of participation and quality recorded up until now.

The quality level of planning, in the Leader and extra-Leader projects, activated by the LAGs - measured by the index of quality – in relation to the number of partners involved (the index of involvement) –is represented in the third map (see Figure 2.20). From the analysis of the intersection of the two indicators arise important insights on how the LAGs have/ had interpreted the “cooperation” both in the planning and in the management of community initiatives and in other local development programmes. The LAGs that during these years have assumed the leader role, have promoted cooperation projects beyond the local borders and with the involvement of local and foreign actors, have considered the cooperation as a way to expand the local horizon, integrating the territorial dimension with the transnational dimension, thus bringing innovative elements in the definition of local development strategies.

Even in this case, it is evident a structural weakness of the LAGs, in terms of “quality” of the planning (meant according to the benchmarks outlined in the previous paragraphs). In the “TOP” quadrant, just two LAGs are ranked: the LAG Isola Salento, which is one of the most dynamic LAGs, and the LAG Fontanabuona & Sviluppo (afterwards Appennino Genovese in Leader +).

Most of the Local Action Groups that stands in the top positions of the reference benchmarks is positioned in the intermediate quadrant which represents a high quality of planning, but a reduced level of involvement.

The LAGs Venezia Orientale, Delta 2000 and Marsica⁴⁹, although maintaining high levels of quality in the planning, take part in projects where the number partners is below the average value, affecting negatively their placement. The remaining of the Local Action Groups stand in the “weaker” quadrant, in which the two indicators assume low values.

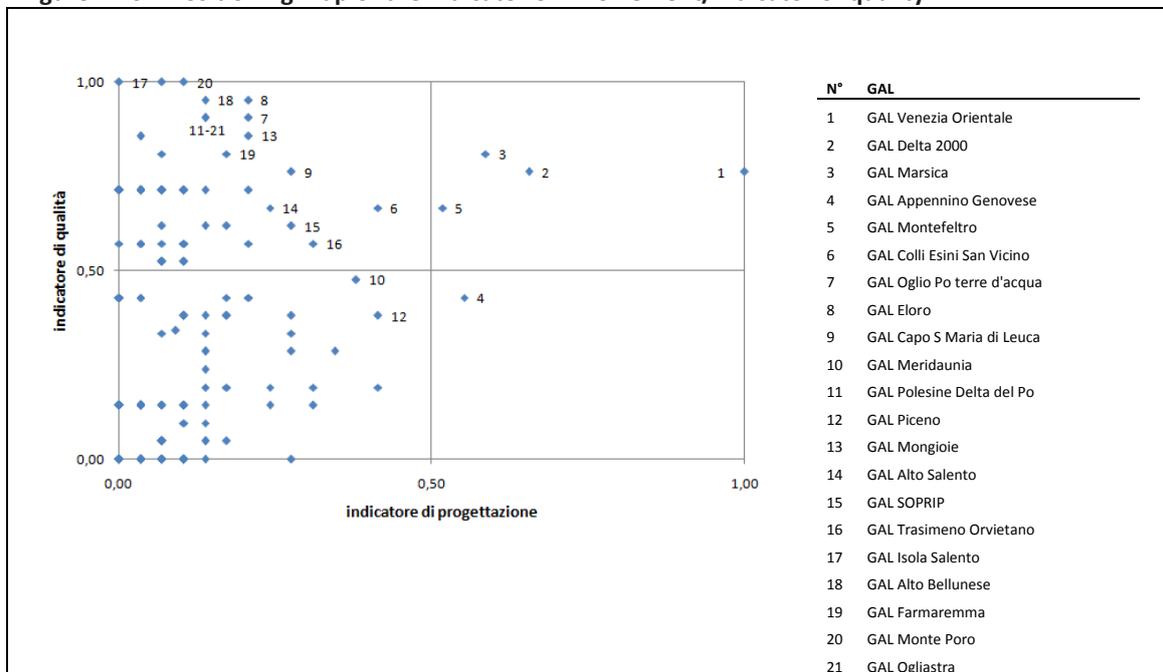
Above all, the general participation to the long networks results weak. This can be explained with the complexity of management and the historical evolution of the LAGs .

The LAGs focus their activities mainly on the management of local development

⁴⁹ The LAG Marsica was not selected in the current programming period (2007-2013) because its territory belongs to other two LAGs (the LAG Gran Sasso Velino and the LAG Alto Sangro Aventino).

projects, typical of the Leader approach. Probably - except for the most “dynamic” LAGs - the natural evolution of the Local Action Groups in Italy, didn’t create the conditions to transform them into real territorial development agencies.

Figure 2.20 – Positioning map of the indicator of involvement/indicator of quality



Source: our processing of database, other sources and direct investigation

This is affected also by the instability of the institutional and territorial (in terms of territory, administrative borders, etc...) in the evolution of the Community Initiative Leader II and Leader+ and then between this and the Leader approach Axis IV. The change in the territorial borders and the organizational dimension, influenced the balance of the management administration and of territorial policy.

Furthermore, such investigation highlighted that the governance of the “Leader Axis IV” foresees new functions and new roles for the Local Action Groups (such as control, interrelation with Paying Agencies, etc.) which, despite the differences between Regions, prefers consolidate agencies, able to define and manage processes and extra- Leader visions.

Basically most of the LAGs is focused on the management of the local activities provided in the Local Development Strategy and are concentrated on the compulsory administrative and procedural contingency, this is the reason why the activity for cooperation as well as other external initiatives is not fully explored.

There are, as already mentioned, some exceptions. Some Local Action Groups show to have organizational capacity, strengthening paths, development strategies shared with several institutional actors working in the same territory since the end of the 90s, some other LAGs whose projects represent just tiles in the overall strategies for the local development, whose partnerships embrace both national and international level. This is the case of the LAG Venezia Orientale, Delta 2000 and Marsica, for example, whose approach, similar to some Agencies for Territorial Development, tends to highlight the performance levels even in this specific benchmark of cooperation.

2.6. Results, difficulties and lessons learned: some of the LAGs considerations

This section reports information extracted by the third section of the questionnaire adopted in the “*field*” survey⁵⁰, which aims to identify the key results of the cooperation projects, the problems that emerged both in their planning and realization and the lessons learned during their implementation. As already mentioned, the questionnaire intended to survey the extra- Leader projects carried out by the Italian LAGs, in order to rebuild - together with the Leader projects collected - their “project baggage” in the field of the cooperation. The reflections of the LAGs focused mainly on Leader projects, but what they declared could be extended to the whole cooperation experience.

Therefore, the following analysis was realized taking into account the direct voice of the actors. This study, even if in synthesis, allows to capture the positive and negative aspects of cooperation which have affected directly and indirectly the governance process of the projects.

2.6.1. Main results

The planning and implementation of the cooperation initiatives gave birth to various results, both in the process and in the product, which can be classified into four categories: institutional, managerial, social and economic.

Among the results of **institutional nature**, the LAGs interviewed highlighted the creation and the consolidation of “*relational networks*” aimed at sharing information and experiences, at fostering new cooperation projects, through the development of common intervention strategies.

New and important relationships have been created by triggering exchanges between the various areas at national and international level: “*the creation and the consolidation of a long-term partnership which has represented the driving force for further cooperation projects*”.

Thanks to the creation of relational networks, thus, it has been possible to develop new growth opportunities for the territories involved. From the evidence gathered, it is clear that the thematic areas covered by the projects resulted enforced. Specifically, the offer of local tourism has been strengthened so as to be more attractive for potential external markets. As evidenced by the respondents: “*with reference to the main results obtained, both in terms of project and in terms of LAG, there is the development of an integrated strategy for the sustainable tourism in the Danube and Po River areas, as well as the creation of a network of municipalities, experts, stakeholder*”. In addition, “*the project has created a common identity for the development of rural areas, it has brought together the rural hospitality businesses of the Mediterranean area under a brand in order to ensure and promote an integrated system of promotion, thanks to the Internet, too*”.

⁵⁰ The analysis concerns the projects identified by the field analysis. The response rate for this section is around 30%.

Even the local identity was strengthened, thanks to the comparison with the international contexts, which gave the opportunity to consolidate the relationships with immigrant communities. For example, *“starting from the project, the LAG Meridaunia has established good institutional relationships with the Federation of Puglia in Ontario. The Federation, in fact, decided to become a member of the LAG in June 2008.”*

Moreover, the cooperation activities have had a positive impact on the competitiveness of local production: the creation of networks among enterprises, category associations, local institutions and research centres have given life to quality systems. Institutional performance generated several *outputs*; the most common results are: sector studies, pilot projects, the creation of common brands, the development of manuals and guidelines for interventions, projects for the territorial promotion.

In the category **“management outputs”** there are both the acquisition of skills connected to the organization and to the administration of the operational structure of the LAG (such as project management techniques) and to the management of the “life cycle” of a European project: cooperation has often provided the LAGs with the ability to identify the adequate organization and management to provide the business social and institutional world with specific services to support their needs. For example, sharing a good monitoring and self-evaluation system, as well as a clear assignment of tasks, allowed the partners to have a clear idea of the project and to fulfil the planned activities successfully. For example, some LAGs declared the importance of the *“correct and efficient management of the project activities, constant monitoring of results, efficient allocation of the budget. And then, identification of a widespread management model with reference to the tourism sector and the spas”*.

Besides, a good project management has allowed to broaden the social basis and, by chance, learn how to consult experts in order to achieve more effective goals. Sometimes, it was possible to overcome the difficulties related to administrative and operational problems and ensure the sustainability of the project by the establishment of bodies to manage and coordinate the LAGs’ activities in common (eg an EEIG). For example, *“The areas and the museums beneficiaries of the project, have become a reference point and driving actors for cultural activities. The project has also allowed the strengthening and consolidation of the network among the areas involved, affecting positively the LAG from a financial point of view with the implementation of small scale economies. Some services and some professionals of the museum were shared, increasing the tourist flow”*.

With reference to the **“social results”** the cooperation projects have established relationships, and have generated cultural exchanges and experiences; moreover, they have promoted joint initiatives for the inclusion of disadvantaged groups of the population in the social and economic context. To interact with different cultures and languages, and involve the most disadvantaged people, LAGs have often used ITC tools. Cooperation supported *“the birth of a network, a joint laboratory for the sharing of good practice and the identification of innovative solutions in the management of the health system and welfare in the Balkan countries involved. The project has enforced the planning and management of health services and, therefore, supported the integration between the health sector and the social world. In particular, the activities of the LAG was significant with regard to the recovery and social reintegration of some types of psychiatric cases”*. As well as, *“the activation of a Start-up Lab for the testing of a Social Farm model supporting the inclusion of disadvantaged subjects in agriculture and rural activities. This model consisted in the creation of social agricultural cooperatives and the dissemination of therapy laboratories.”*

Among the outputs produced we list promotional material, organization of events, analysis and territorial studies as well as specific publications.

The **economic results** detected refer to new job opportunities/training and to the creation and strengthening of local businesses. The cooperation projects have encouraged the employment of weaker subjects (such as women and young people) and promoted educational activities (eg, crafts, tourism, catering). For example, *“among the activities carried out and the achievements obtained, can be included: apprenticeship training and orientation, updating of the tourist guides about local products of Ferrara; organization of a work group to collect information about the economic and tourist programming of the Province; implementation of the “birdwatching” tourism in the Delta of the Po and technical assistance for the operators of typical foodservice; communication and tourism promotion between public and private”*.

The projects, then, have allowed to experience a range of services for the start-up of new businesses and the creation or consolidation of commercial relationships. It is mentioned: *“the presence of a new mentoring service for local enterprises, realized through guidance, support and assistance activities, in order to sustain the definition and evaluation of business ideas.”*

The contact with new areas provided many entrepreneurs with openness and internationalization skills not common in the food and forestry sector and especially in the SMEs.

The creation of networks among enterprises allowed the improvement of the quality systems of local production, favouring, on one hand, the flow of information and the increase of entrepreneurial skills, and promoting, on the other hand, the representation of the local production at the European level. This kind of exposure allowed, in addition, to achieve important objectives such as the recognition of a European certification system and the improvement of the competitiveness of some niche products in the market. Among the indications emerged, in fact, we mention *“the definition of specific procedures and inputs for the promotion and marketing of local typical products in the international market and on the best practice for implementation”*.

2.6.2. Critical issues

The construction and implementation process of cooperation projects has not always been “linear”. From the empirical analysis emerge several critical issues related both to the planning and implementation. The origin of these issues can be “endogenous” and “exogenous”.

The endogenous difficulties concern on one hand, the **partnership**, and on the other hand, **the project planning, management and control**. The partnership is one of the crucial elements of failure/success of the cooperation project: for this reason many of the issues emerged through the “field” analysis derived from “putting together different subjects”. Therefore, the most frequent problems detected are:

Methodology, language barriers and cultural differences

Communication is the first obstacle to overcome in the creation/design of a project with other partners. Despite the choice of a *lingua franca*, in some cases, the debate and dialogue

with foreign participants has been complex and demanding, since LAGs sometimes overestimate their language skills and/or the use of interpreters is not as efficient as required because of the “specificity” of the topic. In addition, each of the partners involved brings with it its own history, specific laws and administrative procedures, a personal knowledge of the business, as well as its own methodology for the planning, organization and implementation of the project. About this issue, a LAG says: *“The most critical issues concerned the involvement of social and institutional actors of Albany in the participated **bottom-up** process, especially due to the new methodology introduced and to a certain **defence** of the personal prerogatives”*. To overcome this critical issue, some of the LAGs organized specific meetings aimed at overcoming (softening) the diversities in legislative context and management in order to share goals by defining general and transparent rules.

Physical distance between the actors involved

Some LAGs have highlighted the problem of the geographical “distance” between the actors which they tried to reduce adopting the new communication tools (ICTs). Their usage has limited the number of travel and meetings, thus reducing the expenditure for the project development. Nevertheless, some LAGs, which operate in distant local contexts, or where the internet accessibility in the rural areas involved is reduced, declared that the “face to face” contact was the only way to make the decision-making process more efficient and effective and to strengthen the relationships between the actors. For this purpose they were forced to arrange more “institutional journeys” than expected, with an increase in costs. For example, *“the planning of the micro-local projects, which represented the central part of the REDAM II project activities, needed a constant commitment in supervision and coordination (objectives, activities, expected results) of the project objectives, activities and results. Therefore, the coordination of the activities required institutional journeys by IRE (International Resident Expert) to Armenia, as well as constant meetings with the local LAGs, during the institutional and technical missions for the start-up of the micro-projects”*.

Difference in administrative competence levels and in the degree of involvement of partners

The survey found that not all the LAGs have the same experience in cooperation projects. Therefore, it is necessary that, before the start-up and the management of projects, the LAGs do a thorough analysis and an “internal” evaluation of the financial and human resources available; this affects the role to be taken in the project and the overall level of involvement. The empirical analysis, in fact, has shown that, in some cases, partners operating in administrative and territorial contexts with diverse characteristics and aspirations, have different expectations and/or ideas about the role or the adequate contribution in the project. The difficulty to manage these differences between the partners derives, according to the survey carried out, from a vagueness in the preliminary stage, such as the definition of the expectations. In many cases, that required the revision of the partners’ commitment and participation due to a preliminary scarce definition of their contributions.

Joining with different motivations

The start-up of a project involves a serious and hard commitment due to the considerable investment of human and financial resources, which requires the assessment of the LAG’s capacity to be promoter of the project according to the theme proposed and after evaluating the connection with the development strategy of the territory. As stated, *“the planning phase could be easily exploited, so that it requires relevant communication activity and the involvement of organizations and associations”*. The different degree of awareness has

often caused the abandonment by some partners or the stop of the project implementation.

Difficulties in the management of the project

The difficulties, arisen with regard to the implementation and management of the project, concerned the different administrative, financial and reporting procedures adopted by individual partners, as well as the timing adopted for the control activities and for the assessment of the procedures defined at European level. An interviewed LAG stated: *“There are also some critical issues concerning the various administrative and/or financial procedures existing in the different countries of the INTERREG III A Adriatic Cross-Border area, although participating in the same project”*. Furthermore, *“Difficulties because of delay in expenditure control are very frequent, thus affecting the reporting management”*. During the starting phase, the problem was the identification of common goals which often leads to misunderstandings in international contexts. As evidenced in the interviews: *“Critical elements concern the partnership, in particular not EU partners, due to the difficulty of transferring and teaching concepts and mechanisms related to the management, implementation and reporting of the EU projects”*.

The critical issues emerged in the definition of the actions (uncertain and confused roles) often derive from the project manager, officially identified by each partner, who pursues his task adopting technical rules and forgetting the spirit of cooperation, neglecting the common objectives. It seems to be crucial, according to many LAGs, the choice of the project leader intended to take the role of a “mediator”, a person able to lead and involve the partnership during the implementation of the project.

The empirical analysis shows that the monitoring and audit procedures adopted were so different that *“it was not possible, in some cases, to quickly grasp the differences between the planned objectives and objectives pursued, to define the corrective actions as a consequence, and to collect the necessary information in order to achieve the final assessment of the project”*. These difficulties highlight the need to support common methodologies and rules, as well as shared procedures, management and coordination of financial resources. Accordingly, *“Difficulties have been faced due to the complexity of the procedures, to the duration of the first-level controls and to the scrupulous methods for the formal and procedural aspects of the second level controls.”*

The **main external obstacles** are closely related to the “context” in which LAG works: the lack of technological infrastructure: *“in the implementation of the Pilot project Alta Val Trebbia we faced many difficulties with the Internet and intranet connection due to the lack of infrastructure”*; the issues raised by most of the LAGs in the survey are: the shortage of information and training and the weakness of the welfare state, *“The critical issues concerned especially the weakness and fragmentation of the health system in Albania where some structural reforms will redefine skills and roles”*. These critical issues made the process of project implementation and/or the realization of the expected outputs more expensive and complex.

2.6.3. Lessons learned

The experiences gathered in the current analysis proved that the definition and implementation of cooperation projects, especially Leader projects, represented for many LAGs an important opportunity to “learn” new strategic and operational procedures which could be adopted also for the implementation of other territorial policies. Specifically, the

process triggered for the implementation of the Community initiatives allowed to:

Acquire/enhance skills. It deals with the ability to manage and implement projects project. It was stated: *“managing the project from the beginning, and so drafting/ writing the idea as well as managing/coordinating financial reports and payment requests, led to the professional growth of the human resources involved”*. The staff acquires new skills, related to the specific topic of the project realized and in some cases it's possible to train new professionals: *“the LAG has disseminated the role of the Business Advisor at the local level”*. To sum up, *“The project activity of the LAG allows to deepen a real complex issue. This represents an important enrichment of the LAG and its staff who will benefit of cognitive abilities acquired for other similar activities and/or similar problems. In addition, the comparison with the partnership (very qualified) gives the opportunity for further possible collaborations”*.

Launch territorial analysis upon the local and the partnership's context, in order to identify strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities, which are necessary in the definition of the local development strategies: *“Thanks to the real exchange of know-how, we realized that the agricultural productions, in the two cross-border areas, are not in competition, but rather they are complementary because they have differences in the cultivation techniques of the same products, and in the different timing of their productions. It gives them the possibility to jointly market a common basket of local products, enriching and increasing the offer in the international markets”*.

Raise awareness, increase the sense of consciousness about the potentials of the territory, as a factor of local development.

Learn the “methodology” of the inter-institutional cooperation in order to adopt it for programming the local development policies: *“The lesson learned is that, even the territories with backward in economic and social terms, can quickly recover the ability to dialogue improving the potential results”*.

Improve cooperation with partners at the transnational level, experimenting new practices and procedures and enhancing problem solving skills. *“The project supported the cooperation, coordination and promotion of stakeholders for a more efficient implementation of national and regional measures. It enhanced innovation and its transfer to the SME's sector. Furthermore, it favoured the cooperation and the exchange of know-how between the actors involved in the field of innovation and eco-innovation, through the creation of an “informal” network still operating, even after the conclusion of the project.”*

3. LEADER COOPERATION POST 2013: BETWEEN EXPECTATIONS AND UNCERTAINTIES

3.1. Scenario Post 2013: implications

The significant number of cooperation initiatives carried out by the LAGs shows how most of them have already acquired the know-how suitable for the starting and an easy management of this programming tool in the different areas of intervention characterizing local development processes. The variety of themes involving the cooperation projects highlights also the fact that LAGs are able to design and manage not only investments of intangible nature (more adequate for the LEADER mission), but also more material investments.

Obviously a more detailed analysis of the started initiatives may draw the attention to some weaknesses (cf. Chapter 2) which, though partly due to factors existing inside the project itself (e.g. the fragmentary nature of interventions, deceptive use of dedicated funds, lacking or insufficient skills, etc.), might mainly derive from the difficulties that the different territories have in acting within political and institutional frameworks showing little flexibility and thus unsuitable for the very nature of cooperation projects. The latter, especially at the international level, require compatible – if not even consistent – procedures, timing, reliable financial flows commensurate with what is at stake, language skills, inclination for comparison and debate, a natural bent for relationships. In short, the institutional bodies in charge of ruling territorial policies are requested the activation of dedicated facilities and human resources to be supported and consolidated over the time. As already mentioned in chapter 1, the insertion of the Leader approach and cooperation in the RDPs, arose strong expectations among local actors about the use of this tool in the enhancement of local rural development processes – the potential enlargement of intervention areas towards all the development fields, greater visibility and attention, more financial resources. In fact, five years after the activation of the current programming phase, Leader cooperation appears rather “battered” Cooperation was experienced by the institutional governance at different levels, as something residual to be negotiated after the starting of the programming phases. For this reason its start-up was obviously slow accentuating the mistiming of schedules adopted by every single State but also by each MA operating in that Member State, thus hindering LAGs which found great difficulties in keeping their commitments with their potential partners, especially the foreigner ones. The results are well known: many Groups had to abandon the initial project design or, in the best case, they reduced the scope of their proposals opting for an inter-regional context rather than inter-territorial or transnational ones, thus calling into question relationships for cooperation and interventions they had made and consolidated with effort over the years. In other words, what was to be a choice (at inter-territorial or transnational level) to consider or take, depending on the strategies to pursue and the goals to achieve at local level, turned out to be a virtual option for many LAGs, possible only on paper.

Moreover, if not effectively addressed, these issues are likely to recur in the post-2013 programming phase which will be characterized not only by the persistence of the Leader approach in the RDPs, but also by a greater integration among five EU development funds. However, also the Leader approach, although mandatory for the rural sector only, can be applied across the Funds if considered an integral part of the Community-Led Local

Development(CLLD), drawing on the financial resources allocated under the regional programmes (ROP and RDP) according to its dedicated intervention field. If on the one hand this gives the Leader approach interesting opportunities, on the other hand it raises the need for a strong governance on the part of institutional bodies.

The situation becomes even more complex for Leader cooperation which in the presence of a transversal application of the CLLD, should be 'adopted' by the Managing Authorities of the other Funds. Potential cooperation actions outside the RDPs' fields will require a major comparison with European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) which is one of the goals⁵¹ of the new cohesion policy and is subject to a specific regulation⁵².

Moreover, the necessary synergy among all territorial cooperation tools, has been recalled by all the various institutional bodies of the European Union (Council, Parliament, Commission) in the major policy papers drawn up at present, and in which it has been highlighted the need for coordinated cooperation actions at all governance levels. From our point of view, an increased synergy between the governance of the "European Territorial Cooperation" and Leader cooperation should be sought as it would allow a "smart" use of the cooperation tool in rural areas thus reducing the fragmentation of interventions, enhancing the support for really strategic and sustainable projects, promoting in a significant way the opening of these areas to external opportunities.

As we have several times claimed in this work, Leader cooperation has got already all the necessary requirements for a peer confrontation with other territorial cooperation tools. Indeed, the methodological aspects on which it is founded (an integrated and participatory territorial approach), as well as its intervention fields closely related to local development (local governance, identity themes and social inclusion, valorisation of local products, tourism activities, etc.) could make it a kind of "toolbox" to be used to better set the goals of territorial cooperation – especially the across-border one – according to the needs of rural territories. On the domestic front, a greater "dialogue" between the target "Cooperation" would allow Leader cooperation to break out of 'isolation' assimilating some ETC operating rules more suitable to its nature hence eliminating the rigidity existing in the EC regulations addressed to rural development actions.

If in the past such a perspective was considered rather unfeasible due to the persistent separation among the various Community funds (especially at the application level), nowadays the request of a greater complementarity of Funds by the Community legislators, as well as a greater autonomy in the setting of the objective "Cooperation", could make complementarity easier. Of course, an explicit and greater encouragement by the European Community would be useful. However to make it real it would be necessary the reaffirmation, in the national guidelines framework, of the importance of making an effort to combine in a systemic approach all the different expressions of territorial cooperation. From the operational point of view, then, the game will be played at the level of every single Member State and during the drafting phase of the Partnership Agreement which, as it is known, will represent the "longhouse" of the Funds. Through it, in fact, all Member States will have to demonstrate and therefore assure the coordination of policies and their consistency. They will also have to

51 *The other objective is represented by "investments for employment increase" (Art.81in the Regulation Proposal on common regulation of European Fund.*

52 *Common Regulations on the objective "European Territorial Cooperation" have not been approved yet. There have been several versions which can be found in the EU website.*

define the complementarity of tools and actions as well as their integration and the way in which the different funds and programmes will pursue and achieve shared objectives including territorial cooperation.

The following paragraph will highlight the principal novelties relating to rural development in the post-2013 programming phase in terms of territorial cooperation including the Leader cooperation.

3.2. The main innovations in the post-2013 Programming Phase in terms of territorial cooperation and Leader

As already mentioned, as for the objective “European Territorial Cooperation (ETC)”, the new programming phase devotes a specific regulation to it. This choice stems from the need to transpose the general provisions referring to the application of Funds and in particular the ERDF, with a specific regulatory context for cooperation. In accord with the past, the three dimensions of territorial cooperation will be confirmed: cross-border, transnational and inter-regional cooperation which will have at their disposal a total grant of some 12 billion Euros (4% of the funds allocated to cohesion, 30% more than in the current programming phase). An important change is represented by the fact that, unlike the previous phases, it is closely linked to the strategic approach adopted by each Member State. This bond will have to be expressed by the Partnership Agreement which will necessarily have to identify the priority sectors for cooperation activities. Firstly the enhancement of thematic concentration – each Operational Programme (OP) of cooperation will select a maximum of 4 out of the 11 possible thematic objectives (except for the inter-regional one for which no restrictions have been placed) and will also have to set priorities among the investments to put in place in order to achieve the target. It is interesting to note that as for cross-border cooperation, investment priorities have been essentially set in favour of the human capital (promoting employment and supporting labour mobility, sustaining social inclusion and combating poverty, supporting education and training, strengthening institutional competences). These are fields that will also affect the CLLD that, as reported in the CLLD Common Guidance, may also find support in the ERDFs for cross-border programmes. In this regard according to the Guidelines it is required that: “... the LAG is composed of representatives of at least two countries, of which one is a Member State ...”. It is also important that the local action group reflects the cross-border dimension in terms of languages covered⁵³.

As far as Leader territorial cooperation is concerned, its confirmation in the new programming phase has been noted in the Article 31 c) – “support to local development by the CSF Funds” – of the Common provisions of Community funds⁵⁴ and recalled in the article 44 Leader-co-operation activities in the Section 2 of the draft version of Regulations on rural

53 Cf. Annex 5 of the document “Common Guidance of the European Commission Directorates-General AGRI”, EMPL, MARE and REGIO on Community-Led Local Development in European Structural and Investment Funds”, version of 29th April 2013.

54 European Parliament and Council regulations bearing common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, European Social Fund, Cohesion Fund, European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, European Fund for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries within the Common Strategic Framework and the Common Provision Regulation on European Regional Development Fund, European Social Fund, Cohesion Fund abrogating the EC Regulation n. 1083/2006 by the European Commission.

development⁵⁵ dedicated to the Leader approach. In the articles mention is made of what follows:

- Two possible kinds of cooperation to be started: territorial cooperation (within a Member State territory), and transnational cooperation (projects shared by territories of different Member States and/or territories of third Countries).
- Preparatory technical support to be put in use for both types of cooperation provided that LAGs proved to be involved in the implementation of concrete cooperation projects.
- The opportunity for LAGs to cooperate not only with other LAGs but also with public and private partners which;
 - operate in a rural territory and that are implementing local development strategies inside or outside the EU;
 - operate in a non-rural territory but involved in the implementation of local development strategies.
- The way the competent authorities should select cooperation projects in case they are not selected directly by the LAGs. The modality in question is the 'on going' application. In this case it is necessary to recall the following mandatory actions:
 - publicize the national or regional procedures adopted for the selection of transnational cooperation projects, as well as a list of the eligible costs within two years from the approval date of rural development Programmes;
 - approve cooperation projects within four months from their submission date;
 - communication by the Member States to the Commission on the approved transnational cooperation projects.

The up-mentioned actions are mentioned in the paragraph 8.4 of Common Guidance on CLLD⁵⁶ which, as fittingly expressed by some experts, leave many outstanding operational aspects although effective as for the methods point of view⁵⁷. In the first paragraph mention is made of the possibility for the Funds to finance the planning and implementation of the cooperation activities of the LAGs in the CLLD framework. In the two following paragraphs it is underlined the fact that these activities are envisaged (and regulated) only in the EAFRD and EMFF (Fisheries Fund) framework, thus the application of these regulations to the ERDF and ESF is therefore strongly recommended for simplicity and consistency reasons. This phrase represent a fundamental step as it would give Leader cooperation great possibilities of action.

Moreover, in the note referring to the first paragraph it is recalled the possibility for the LAGs to cooperate within the framework of an ETC cross-border programme. Such an opportunity,

55 *Proposal of a Regulation on the Europe Parliament and of the Council on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural development (EAFRD), (2011/0282 (COD)), June 2013.*

56 *Reference to the 29th April 2013 draft version.*

57 *Robert Lukesch, The Common Guidance on CLLD from the Commission: a commentary, website: The Local Development Network, July 2013, (www.lidnet.eu/Comments%20on%20CLLD%20guidance).*

as already mentioned in the introductory passage, is further developed in the Annex 5 of the Guidance in question.

Another interesting point in the CLLD Common Guidance, refers to the opportunity given to MAs to directly select the cooperation projects. In this regard, it is highlighted the fact that this option should be seen as an exception of the bottom-up approach (the selection is referred to LAGs in the development phase of the LDPs). This fact may suggest that the Guidance makers would favour a direct selection of the projects by LAGs. However, in this case, in order to assure greater flexibility in the approval of the projects by the several MAs, it is recommended to ensure the activation of more than one call during the collection of the projects (at least 3 or 4).

Table 3.1 – The Measure “Leader Local Development” Sub-session 3 “Preparation and Implementation of LAGs Cooperation Activities”

Kind of operation	
Eligible Costs	(i) Technical preparation costs for inter or transnational cooperation projects (ii) Costs for cooperation projects with a MS (inter-territorial cooperation) or cooperation projects among different territories in different MSs or with Third Countries(transnational cooperation)
Beneficiaries	LAGs, local actors
Eligibility rules	(i) LAGs must address to concrete projects to be implemented (ii) to be set within the Local Development Strategy (iii) in case projects are selected by a MA, a list of all the eligible costs must be issued by the Authority itself
Principles to define selection criteria	(i) It must be established by the Managing Authority (ii) It must be set within the Local Development strategy NB the selection system of the projects, in the field of the Local Development Strategy, is approved by the Managing Authority through the selection of a specific strategy . thus it is not subject to further approval and/or consultancy by/with the relevant Managing Authority and Monitoring Committee In case cooperation projects are selected by the MA, selection procedures for cooperation projects must be made public
Connection with other Community measures	Common Provision Regulation on EAFRD; rules on the eligibility of costs ,articles 55-61 of the Regulation ‘umbrella’(CPR) Regulation of European Territorial Cooperation
Financial support rates	Up to 100% of the expenditures according to the rules governing State aid co-financing by public and private investors is hoped for
Co-financing rates	90% maximum rate for EAFRD contribution for the programmes addressed to less developed regions, outermost regions and the smaller Aegean islands 80% maximum rate for EAFRD contribution for all the other regions (art.65(4))

Source: European Commission

Leader cooperation is obviously mentioned also in the draft of the Fiche on the Measure “Leader Local Development” released by the DG for Agriculture and rural development in spring 2013. According to what it is expressed in the article 31 of the Regulation also called “umbrella”, and in the Regulation on Rural Development, the Leader approach will be introduced in the RDP making it convey into a single measure. Such a measure will consist of 5 sub-sections the third of which dedicated to cooperation⁵⁸. Its content, shown in the Table 3.1, is not significantly different from the preceding documents, but for the mentioning of the Regulation on the ETC among the other regulations of reference. This fact could unleash potential synergies between the two tools.

3.3. The main problems to be solved

Consistently with its aims and different dimensions, the tool cooperation features strong elements of complexity which require specific structures and expertise during the programming and implementation phases of the interventions in order to ensure the correct and flexible use of this tool.

The drafts and policy papers so far released by the EU⁵⁹ as well as those developed at national level, highlight the fact that the issue “cooperation” still remains an under-debated topic – Leader cooperation in particular. Actually, there are several problems to solve which should be addressed to in this early phase, in order to find good solutions in a timely manner. Discussions should be started primarily at national level on the implementation procedures, and adopted to make the most of this tool. Obviously the use of Leader cooperation is bound to the future structure and size of the CLLD and the specific application of the Leader approach inside it. According to the past experiences, though, it would be a mistake to address the cooperation issue to already-solved problems within the CLLD⁶⁰. It would be fundamental to tackle the issue on how Leader cooperation should be implemented, following the different procedures characterizing CLLD governance, in order not to be caught unprepared at the start of the programming phase. At the same time all the potential synergies existing between Leader cooperation and European Territorial Cooperation should be fully explored. As far as ETC is concerned, the opportunity to use Local Action Groups within cross-border cooperation should be taken into consideration. The fact is that while on the one hand CLLD could give rise to cooperation projects in this field, on the other hand it is a fact that cross-border

58 The other sub-sessions refer to 1) preparatory support to the design of local development strategy; 2) implementation of the procedures under the CLLD strategy; 4) management costs; 5) animation

59 While this Volume was being issued, the European Commission was drawing a working paper “Guidance for implementation of the Leader cooperation activities in rural development programmes 2014-2020” which was submitted but not discussed by the Committee for rural development on 16th October 2013. From a first glance to its content it is possible to notice that it broadly reflects what already stated in the past programming phases leaving some important issues unsolved such as the governance of Leader cooperation, the relationship with CLLD and other cooperation programmes, the information flows between MAs concerning transnational cooperation. Its content as well as possible comments will be a subject for specific technical papers of the NRR to refer to

60 In the issue of July 2013 of the paper “Guidelines for the application of Community-Led Local Development in Italy”, drawn up at national level, cooperation is not addressed to and only a superficial mention is made of potential interterritorial cooperation projects to be developed by LAGs belonging to different types of territory (urban, rural, and coastal) without mentioning any guide lines of reference.

cooperation is funded only by one of the five European Community Funds – the ERDF.

The same problem concerns the leader approach as it is co-funded only by the EAFRD. So, how is it necessary to act when the Leader is part of a CLLD? Can all the cooperation projects of the LAGs act in all the intervention fields envisaged by the CLLD? And if the answer is yes, what are the rules of reference? This issue has been addressed by the Common Guide Lines on CLLD, in which it is recommended the adaptation of SEF and ERDF regulations on the subject of cooperation according to what it is envisaged by the EAFRD (as well as the EMFF) .

The problem is connected to another key issue. In the past programming phases, in fact, Leader cooperation was strongly tied to the themes developed within the local development plan framework and adopted by the LAGs. This represented not only a specific feature of Leader cooperation but also its added value. However it should be considered that by now several Leader editions have followed one another and that they have allowed the implementation of different local development strategies ranging from the generalist to the thematic ones. At the same time different tools for an integrated territorial design have been used in synergy or in a parallel fashion (our country in particular has resorted to them more often than other countries). The paths that development has followed so far at local level are various – perhaps for some of them, now mature, the time has come to acquire an extra-local dimension to become more consolidated. It would be a missed opportunity not to allow a territory to express its needs for cooperation in a more flexible way, finding all the possible synergies with the themes and fields that will be attributed to LAGs in the new programming phase. This would award the experiences already consolidated at local level with an added value, although it should not be neglected the fact that cooperation is in itself a tool for local development aiming at enhancing local themes and aspects that better suit the inter-territorial and transnational dimensions.

Moreover, due to the complexity and nature of transnational cooperation projects, the role that will be played by the main institutions operating in the technical and administrative spheres of Leader cooperation, should be given the greater attention and consideration that they deserve. The CLLD Guidelines face, or rather recall, this issue hoping that the institutions concerned would take appropriate precautions to prevent the discouragement of LAGs to cooperation because of the inhomogeneity in the procedures for the selection and approval of projects and the non-alignment of deadlines to be met. In fact, it would be very useful to start a detailed discussion at various levels, on which measures should be factually adopted and how it would be possible to make them effective during the programming phase. For example, as far as the role of the Commission is concerned, it should be discussed how to make useful and timely the information exchange system that the Commission is going to put in place to help the MAs involved have a complete vision of the approval process of transnational cooperation projects. Experience shows that it is essential to have a centralized “control room” ready to intervene to get rid of the possible obstacles encountered during the approval of the projects. The fact that Leader cooperation represents a piece of the new programming phase should not be neglected and the need to address this theme in time is becoming even more urgent for those Countries characterized by a strong administrative decentralization like for example our country. Use should be made of tools enhancing the harmonization of procedures through a strong coordination action driven not only by intentions but especially by shared commitments. As an alternative another path could be explored – the insertion of “Leader cooperation” in a national programme. This option, envisaged by the new programming phase, if well managed could simplify the CLLD governance at regional level. In particular, a national control would foster:

- a greater focusing by cooperation projects on investment priorities, within the thematic objectives, thus ensuring a greater critical mass to the projects;
- the uniformity of procedures;
- the adoption of a consistent timing in the project implementation which would allow to meet the tight schedule envisaged by Regulations;
- a better coordination with the DG for agriculture and the other EU countries as for transnational cooperation;
- the coordination, at national level, with other cooperation OPs.

Obviously, the adoption of a dedicated national programme or the mere management of cooperation within the RDPs represent the two extremes of an axis, along which different options are placed deriving from the combination between them. As an example, it could be hypothesized that, using the National Rural Network, some of the steps characterizing the implementation of Leader cooperation are delegated at a central level, e.g. the preparatory phase of cooperation projects (the analysis of the needs in the cooperation field, the partner research and the arrangement of cooperation projects) or it could be possible to include also the collection and selection phases of the projects and then delegate to the MAs the implementation phase of the interventions and their relating allocation of financial resources. In any case these are important choices which, in order to be successful, would require a shared involvement at various institutional levels. However, more than anything else, Leader cooperation would entail the overcoming of a project-based vision of cooperation in favour of a more programmatic one. De facto, if on the one hand LEADER cooperation can now rely on consolidated tools and specific methodologies for the design and implementation of every single project, on the other hand what appears to be still insufficient is the model of governance adopted so far because of its setting and implementation which should be a subject of further reflections, especially in the transnational cooperation field.

In short, among the many lessons that can be learned from the past editions of the Community programmes, there is the one according to which opportunities slip away, and not making the most of them or even be unprepared, thus missing the chance, is a luxury that, now more than ever, no Member State can be granted, least of all Italy. This also applies to the use of Leader cooperation.

Acronyms

MA: Managing Authority
FPA: Framework Programme Agreement
CLLD: Community Led Local Development
CPR: Common Proposal Regulation
ETC: European Territorial Cooperation
EMFF: European Maritime and Fisheries Fund
EAFRD: European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
ERFD: European Regional Development Fund
ESF: European Social Fund
LAG : Local Action Group
EEIG: European Economic Interest Grouping
INEA: National Institute for Agricultural Economics
MAE= Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Meuro: Millions of Euros
Mipaaf: Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policy
LAP: Local Action Plans
RLP Regional Leader Programme
SME: Small and medium enterprises
OP: Operational Programme
LDP: Local Development Plan
PSN: National Strategic Plan
RDP: Regional Development Plan
NRN National Rural Network
ICT: Information and Communication Technology
EU: European Union

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