

Community-led local development, risks and opportunities

For many months we have been hearing about Community-led Local Development, Leader Approach and Local Action Groups.

The present “Open Days” edition has been focusing the attention on these topics, above all during many meetings and analyses.

It is clear as crystal that in this particular period, where an economic crisis is followed by a more devastating one, where many development policies adopted in the past don't seem to have got the right results, we expect that from the top hat of the new EU policies a new magic can get out in order to solve or to minimize at least common development problems.

It is easy to be afraid, because these justifiable waits can let a new planning start, a new development pattern, a new alchemy, starting all over again, as if the foregoing adopted policies don't have caused any result. The errors and the successes of the past must be useful as a guide to plan the coming actions.

We hope that this time will be different. Maybe now the past experience will be useful to create the bases for a new development action. Maybe all the “structural” problems of our Europe won't be solved, but it is possible to start looking at the development as strength, a bottom up pressure. Let's jump in the past to remember what it happened.

At the beginning of the nineties, the EU published the Community Initiative Leader Programme.

It was an innovative and very ambitious programme that completely changed the main theories on the local development.

That's why we started hearing about “Bottom-up”, that means the bottom-up development: needs, objectives and strategies are decided by each territory thanks to the taking part of all the protagonists: citizens, associations, both individual and public stakeholders, municipalities and local authorities.

Without any awareness and twenty years early, let the “**Consultation**” start through the “**Taking part**”, where people become “**Active part**”.

The comparison and discussion among and with the local actors are one's daily bread for the LAGs, the moment to decide and plan the development of a specific territory.

Twenty years went by and the consultation through the bottom-up is still a present topic.

It is not absurd if we state that, **the Leader approach has always been the best pattern of territorial development than EU activated programmes.**

The first Local Action Groups (LAGs) were born in Europe and now they try to understand what they have to do, which role they have got.

But even the best development pattern walks on the human legs.

That's why the same pattern applied to different humans has brought many successful cases, but also many failures.

During the present programme (2007/2013), someone has been thinking to rectify the errors caused by the “human”, including the Leader approach into the Rural Development Plans (AXIS 4 EARDF).

That development methodology, the LEADER, starting from concrete requirements, a diligent SWOT analysis (based on **Strengths – Weaknesses**, integral part of the analysis context,

Opportunities and Threats, that come from the outward context to which the specific territorial and analysed realities have to face up), the comparison/clash among local actors and proposing “**sartorial**” innovative and specific solutions for that particular territory, has been changed including it into a programme with homogenous rules and where everything must be retraced to Axes, Actions at numerical values: **the effect indicators**.

In other words, it means that the development actions of a Maltese LAG can't be different from those ones of a German LAG. It is not important if the territory of reference is located in the North or South, East or West Europe; it is not relevant if the climatic, geomorphic, cultural, social and economic features are obviously different. **It is not important if the consultation has got results and identified different development ways**, the possible feasible actions, apart from the context differences, are the same or, to be more exact, the freedom of choice is really limited.

The result or effect of this standard has been: even if the Context Analyses of LAGs Development Plans are very different, the medicine is the same for everybody. Even Europe is not homogenous and there are many local identities!

Nowadays, many people agree on the fact that this has been a great error, caused by an excessive wish to *schematize* everything; to make *countable* phenomena that have many difficulties in it.

In practise, we succeeded in changing the Leader Approach, the same Approach that other Countries are copying and carrying out, because deemed effective (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Russia, and so on).

Start making development, with many ties and restrictions, is not certainly a simple question. In this planning too, there are positive and negative cases, because the main principle is always the same: development, as well as ideas, walks on human legs.

But during these years, LAGs could discuss, face each other, and talk about only about “Rural Development”, because the Leader was DG Agriculture's tool.

In practise, on the same territory virtual borders have been created. According to the structural fund, both about agricultural and regional development, in the same context different development programmes were carried out; they weighed upon the same territory, the same actors, the same emergencies and often brought to different and conflicting actions, carried out by different subjects and with the main actors, the stakeholders were completely disoriented and launched in continuous “consultation” meetings.

For example, it happened that on the historical and cultural heritage improvement and on the same goods were planned two strategies, two interventions and two promotional actions, the first carried out by the LAG through the EARDF, the last one by an “Integrated Plan of Territorial Development” (PIST) or “Territorial Agreement” (“Patto Territoriale”) or “Area Vasta” or “Distretto” through the ERDF. Many strange things happened in Europe during the carrying out of Funds.

I have been upholding for many years and during many discussions a practical experience concerning the carrying out of funds at a territorial context. That means that on the same homogenous territory it is not possible to have different development policies. It is wrong to create borders and called it, only in case of need, “Rural Development”, “Local Development”, and “Urban Development” and so on. If the attention is turned to a homogenous area, there is a sole development and it is not possible to have different solutions and conflicting actions, otherwise the territory would be embittered, many energies and resources would be spent in vain and absurd results would be got.

Now we think who has tried to carry out development policies on the territory; many LAGs trying to change themselves into Development Agencies, forced to explain to stakeholders that, changing the type of Community Fund not only rules were changed, but it was always necessary to start all over again.

In order to get round these possible problems during the regulation writing stage, for the coming community planning, many **demarkation** criteria among funds, that's to say borders.

This is important in order to completely understand the meaning of some articles included in the drafts of the new regulations put into practise.

In fact, in the Regulation containing common provisions about European Funds COM (2011) 615, we try to find a remedy for all the mistakes.

The articles from 28 to 31 deal with the *community-led local development* (consultation) called *Local Development guided by LAGs*.

Besides: *the Local Development is consistent and coordinated among the Funds of the Community Support Framework. That consistency and coordination are assured through the financing of the LAGs local development strategies asking for the taking part in more Funds. LAGs work out and carry out local development strategies. The member countries decide the role of the LAGs.*

In order to make it easier, the European Parliament has understood that the local Development of homogenous territories must be carried out through a sole development plan, arranged and carried out by LAGs, and the only that for ever twenty years have been showing in Europe to be able to maintain active policies for their own territories.

But now we have a doubt: will the member countries, having the role to decide the role of the LAGs, be convinced that it is right to understand everything suggested by the Parliament in the reminded regulation?

How wide is the risk that the Countries or managing Regions shorten the role of the LAG in simple informative agencies?

I would have many questions and doubts springing from sensations, but now it is better to start understanding that a part of the competitiveness of our Europe also goes through these articles. This discussion will weigh upon the coming territorial development, certainly until 2020.

Nowadays, the competitiveness of a system depends on its ability to organize all the energies and resources, systematize them, join and coordinate them.

The role of a Development Agency must be to pick up all strengths and system opportunities, to join them; to attack the weaknesses and threats through a programmatic and coordinated action.

If the territory of reference is structurally weak, the result of a well-coordinated action will be obvious and positive.

In order to make this easier, it is necessary and clear to give the right role, the necessary responsibilities and resources.

Some negative results, during the accomplishment of Community Programmes, are often caused by the fact that the needs were identified at local level, but the actions decided and often carried out at central level, as well as at superior one.

In the new planning there is finally the possibility to work out a sole Local Development Plan, as well as the opportunity to join the same Plan to certain and on time interventions, carried out by the territory through the LAGs. We identify the emergency and threat; the objective/result to get; the LAGs start the action and directly reply to the “beneficiaries” in a direct and firm comparison to the stakeholders and without the possibility to transfer the local responsibilities to others.

Citizens become the main actors, because they busily contribute both in the programmatic and fulfilment stage, also accepting the role of real “supervisors”, having the power in case of need to submit all the necessary actions to rectify, actually, possible errors or adaptabilities of strategy to the changed economic situations starting an easy and quick “interactive” stage in taking decisions.

It is not a question of “Free Will”. Everything is re-established inside certain rules and a National and Regional strategy of which the local one is a supplemented and integral part.

In this scenery, LAGs will have to provide themselves, if they haven’t done this yet, with a professional and technical structure, becoming the missing ring in a dialogue between centre (EU/State) and suburbs, with the awareness and responsibility that every Community policy has an impact and is carried out through the local level. If it can be active and contain proposals, it will be able to answer the difficult continuous challenges that the future will call us to face them up.

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