

Expanded abstract

The Leader program in the face of the need to promote a more shared and participatory development strategy. Conclusions drawn from the Basque example

Objectives

Within the diversity of proposals for rural development, a set of recommendations emerges that most researchers consider essential to counteract the lack of rural areas. These recommendations include implementing a coordinated and balanced territorial strategy, fostering a locally rooted entrepreneurial culture, building social and relational capital with a territorial focus, and promoting an institutional framework that empowers local development entities.

Local Action Groups (LAGs) play a pivotal role in this framework, particularly since the implementation of the Leader initiative, which pioneered local development strategies in rural areas. These groups are tasked with integrating social partners within the territory to conceive, promote, and manage development programs.

The initial implementation of these programs three decades ago revealed the necessity for municipalities to collaborate, as well as for businessmen and other social actors to align their approaches. Newer programs, encompassing broader themes, succeeded in uniting social agents beyond the agricultural sector. Over time, a network has been established that remains critical in advising authorities on regional development strategies.

The conclusion of the previous Leader program and the inception of a new one in 2022 present an opportunity to scrutinize the central element guiding the work of the LAGs over the next six years: the Local Development Strategy (LDS). Analyzing its formulation, stakeholder involvement, and key elements can elucidate the capacity of these groups to implement a participatory, comprehensive development strategy that fosters local entrepreneurship.

This research focuses on the development process of the LDS within the Leader program in the Basque Country. The study aims to address two fundamental questions: the participatory nature of the initiative and the empowerment of LAGs in content management.

The research starts from the hypothesis that the Leader program in the Basque Country departs significantly from the principles that characterize it, i.e. from being a program conceived and implemented from the local communities, to become yet another program managed by the Administration and directed to the local population. The main objective of this research is not only to confirm this hypothesis, but also to analyze the possible causes that have led to this situation and to propose ways of improvement for the development of the program in this territory.

Methodology

In the exploration, different sources, often unpublished, are used as the preferred way to obtain information. The proposed methodology is adequately adapted to the particularities inherent to the research. Addressing the purpose pursued, which involves assessing the role of the various actors in the achievement of the LDS that will guide the course of the Leader program in the Basque Country, demands the combination of different methodologies.

1. Over a period of one year, an exhaustive monitoring of the process of formulation of the LDS was carried out. This generated extensive documentation ranging from the genesis of the strategy to the participants involved and the decisions taken.
2. The assessment of the information gathered is crucial to evaluate its relevance and reliability. To this end, it is essential to contrast this documentation with the key rural development actors, especially with those responsible for representing the RDAs in the group that piloted the preparation of the LDS.
3. The objective is to lead discussions within the bodies responsible for defining the LDS. To achieve this, consensus was sought on specific proposals with a significant group of members from the Local Action Group, specifically representatives from Gipuzkoa. Taking advantage of this approach, several meetings were organized to achieve consensus on various aspects related to the challenges that should be included in a LDS shared among different regions.
4. Consultations aimed to compare the realities observed in the Basque example with those of other regions. To this end, interviews were conducted with the leaders of LAGs from various autonomous communities of Spain.

The contrast with the rural development agents, especially those responsible for the RDA, is the methodology prioritized to assess it. Different types of interviews are used, from the informal, unstructured interview, based on a relationship of trust and knowledge of cause, to the use of directional dynamics aimed at helping the participants in ordering the criteria that will structure their LDS.

Results and Conclusions

The responsibility for determining the geographical areas to benefit from the Leader strategy, deciding the number of LAGs operating in the Basque Country, and establishing the general guidelines for the EDL lies with the political leaders of their autonomous and provincial institutions. While the call is open and theoretically not mandatory, there is an “implicit recommendation” directed towards the LAGs. Interviews conducted with members of the steering committee and leaders of the LAGs in Gipuzkoa support this assertion, as shown by the results below:

1. The Administration excessively conditions and supervises the operation of the Leader program in the Basque Country, imposing a preferential line of action and a single LAG for the entire rural territory of the Basque Country.

2. The LDS and the resulting LAGs attempt to rapidly create a unified strategy for the whole group. They promote a strategy for the designated area, addressing common issues across the entire territory and actions in identified vulnerable areas. However, their chances of success are severely limited. Their strategy is heavily constrained by administrative interference, preventing them from independently selecting challenges for each territory or ensuring local population participation in the strategy's design and implementation.
3. The situation of the LAGs and the Leader program in the rest of Spain is significantly different. These regions do not face the same restrictive conditions as the Basque Country. They all present strategies aimed at involving the local population and prioritize, within the program's requirements, the lines to be developed. Their concerns focus on overcoming challenges imposed by the managing authority, the symbolic nature of some partnerships, or budget constraints to implement the approved strategy, among other issues.

Many LAGs require a reorientation in their functioning, particularly towards greater empowerment and the development of more participatory strategies. This need is especially urgent in the Basque context. Among the recommended measures, the first involves selecting a more coherent territory of action that faces similar challenges. The current autonomous scale, with a single group for the entire Basque Country, is deemed inadequate. Instead, the provincial level is proposed as the most appropriate, advocating for the creation of three LAGs within the Basque Country. Although the rural habitat, its evolution, and current situation may differ among provincial territories, these differences are much less pronounced within each province. This approach would facilitate greater consensus in the diagnosis and formulation of the LDS.

Reducing the territory to be addressed would also facilitate a LDS that is more participatory and accessible to the local population. This responsibility would shift to six RDAs, instead of the current 18. These entities are accustomed to working closely with local people and have significant involvement from both public and private sector representatives in their partnerships. Moreover, these RDAs have deep connections with their territories and over three decades of experience. Organized by provincial territories, they already address many challenges at this scale. Empowering them to lead the Leader program would further encourage collaboration among them.

Another essential step is to grant each group greater empowerment, allowing the local population and the partnership within it to determine the areas to be addressed through its LDS. Approaches, diagnoses, and proposals can vary significantly, and experience, particularly in the Basque Country, demonstrates that involving the local population is crucial for promoting integrated development in their environment.

Finally, there is a strong conviction that promoting a LAG for each territory would enhance the current dynamics of collaboration among different RDAs, particularly among their stakeholders. The outcomes of this collaboration have the potential to magnify the achievements of the Leader program. Establishing new channels of communication provides additional ave-

nues to address challenges that cannot be effectively resolved through the program alone. The experience of RDAs underscores the interest of local administrations and other departments in contributing to rural area progress, and even other departments, in collaborating in the progress of rural areas. Enhanced communication facilitates a more effective response to local needs and priorities.