

1. LEADER approach: a starting point for review

In the latest programming cycles, rural development policy has undergone an important shift, moving from a purely sectorial and productivist approach to an integrated, territorial one (Labianca, 2016; Cejudo and Labianca, 2017; Gkartzios and Scott, 2014; Ray, 2001; Dax, 2015). Rural development under the common agricultural policy (CAP) is acquiring particular importance and effectiveness in all European territories with the great task of rediscovering the potential and capacity of rural territories, in particular, more recently, of the inner peripheries, in many cases representing for them an opportunity to solve problems of isolation, emigration and aging of the population (Labianca and Navarro, 2019).

The risk of peripheralization and aging of the European countries is, moreover, a question currently widely debated (Espon, 2014; 2017; 2020) and it is particularly evident that these phenomena, together with low growth, cover a large part of the European territory and will worsen in the coming years especially in the regions lagging behind (Figure 1). But in order to have a more comprehensive picture of the situation in Europe it is necessary to understand the main facets of the phenomenon.

Regarding mapping, it is necessary to take into consideration various aspects of peripheralization (Espon, 2017), which is considerably worse in rural areas. Limited access to the centers of economic activity produces disadvantages in terms of economic activity, though the effects on human and social capital may be less significant. A greater direct impact on the human and social capital cycle emerges from the disadvantages that derive from aspects of geographical distance and availability of infrastructure. The lack of "organizational proximity" involves not simply

the geographical characteristics in physical terms but above all the presence of a weakness of interaction and a lack of connection between the interested parties and the wider networks (Ibidem).

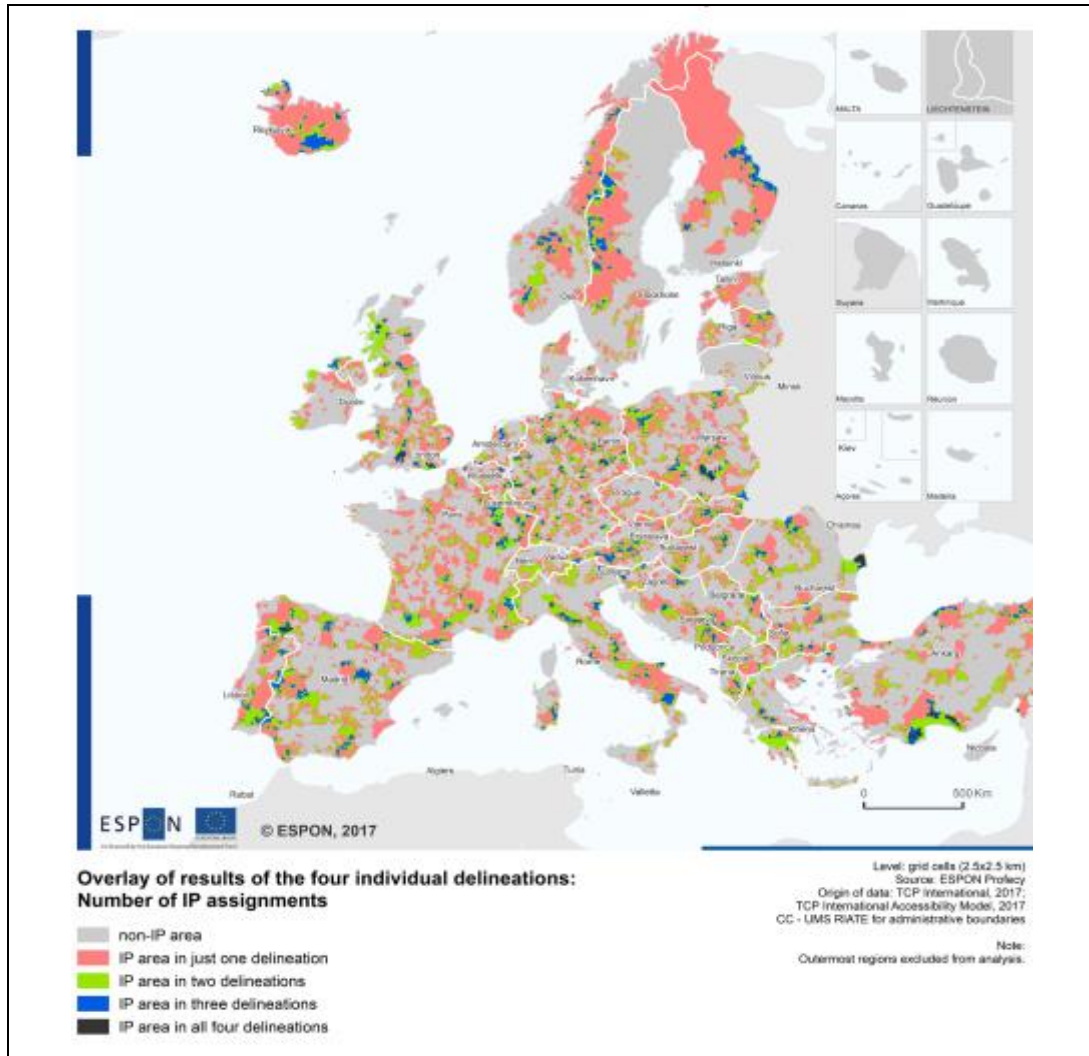
These disadvantages can be greatly exacerbated and produce negative effects in rural areas since they are less likely to innovate. The development of human capital and the propensity for innovation in such areas are severely hampered by the phenomenon of depopulation, which especially involves younger and more educated people.

Effective political interventions to reverse the processes of peripheralization and aging are based on a multilevel political approach. It is argued that path changes in the development trajectory, in particular in these areas, are rare, so there is an urgent need for a concerted political action to interrupt these descending cycles (Espon, 2017). Therefore the policies that can be used to support the strategies for peripheral and marginal areas will be those that are particularly attentive to the territorial needs. This is a clear reference to the range of rural development policies tried out in the last decade, in particular during the two programming periods 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 in the context of the CAP.

But these programmes have some limits as regards the territorial approach, since they lack a coherent vision of the needs of the different territories and a coordinated action between the different funding sources. In fact it has often been found that public support tends to be concentrated in areas that are already economically developed rather than attempting to rebalance the social and economic disparities existing between sub-regional territories (Espon, 2017).²

² In this regard we also refer to the publication edited by M. Prezioso with the results of the Prin 2015 about the application of STEMA in the analysis of programming documents (see Prezioso, 2020).

Figure 1. Combination of the four delineation approaches to define Inner Peripheries.



The map represents the areas that have been identified as inner peripheries at the grid level, most of them with multiple characteristics of peripherality (almost 70%). They are classified according to the number of times an area is identified as an inner periphery based on belonging to one or more conceptual delineations adopted in the research (delineation 1: higher travel time to regional centres; delineation 2: economic potential interstitial areas; delineation 3: areas of poor access to services of general interest; delineation 4: depleting areas). Source: Espon Profecy, 2017.

In this context, the LEADER approach, from a programmatic point of view, has been specifically designed for rural areas to reduce territorial inequalities and solve the related problems such as population aging and depopulation (Labianca and Navarro, 2019). As expressly argued by the European Commission's original guide (2006) and widely recognized by the literature (among others, Dargan and Schucksmith, 2008; Dax and Oedl-Wieser, 2016; Woods, 2005; Ray, 2000; Cejudo and Navarro, 2020; Cejudo and Labianca, 2017; Chevalier, 2014; Shucksmith, 2000), LEADER has been described as a highly innovative approach within European rural development policy. Its innovative character is not indicated in a generic sense but essentially concerns territorially embedded social aspects. As its name suggests, it should create, promote and support "Links between actions of rural development", through the work of local partnerships, LAGs, basing its action specifically on the human and social capital present in the territories. In fact, LEADER can be considered a sort of "laboratory for building local capabilities and for testing out new ways of meeting the needs of rural communities" (EC, 2006, p. 5) .

Since its launch in 1991, LEADER and contextually the CAP have evolved over time, together with the greater complexity of the agricultural sector. LEADER's innovative strength, along with the recognition of the diversity of European territories, has made it such an integral part of rural development policy that it has become a programme that is no longer separate but integrated ('mainstream') especially during the recent programming cycle 2007-2013 in all national/regional rural development programmes.

Important basic characteristics and principles of LEADER are contained in the main guides regularly published by the European Commission which are also an important historical memory of its actual functioning, role, objectives and evolution over time. Unfortunately, as will be discussed in more detail later, these guides are taken into consideration only to a limited extent, especially on an operational and local level. Among them, the 2006 European Commission programme guide is significant because it heralded the increasingly incisive role of LEADER in the imminent 2007-2013 programming cycle. It highlighted the fact that

LEADER action was not limited to economic and sectoral aspects, but extended to broader social objectives (such as ageing population, service provision, or the lack of employment opportunities...) and included the improvement of the quality of life. This was to be done by encouraging innovation in a broad sense, in fact rural territories can explore “new ways to become or to remain competitive, to make the most of their assets and to overcome the challenges they may face” (EC, 2006, p. 5). From this point of view, by recognizing the inevitable evolution of the role of agriculture, LEADER adopts a new conception of innovation, in particular social innovation (among others De Rubertis et al., 2015; Labianca, 2016; Labianca et al., 2016; 2020; Dax et al., 2016; Kovacs et al., 2016; Belliggiano et al., 2018).

In this context, as Dargan and Shucksmith (2008, p. 275) argue, “innovations have moved from a linear view” of knowledge and solutions “towards a model in which innovation is conceived as a co-evolutionary learning process occurring in the social networks of an array of actors”. The territorial context plays a central, strategic role, within LEADER, and social factors take on a crucial importance, so it becomes fundamental to understand the context in which innovation takes place. Aspects such as internal potentiality, structures and dynamics of government and governance must be considered, rather than exclusively standardized externalities and material factors. Therefore, as can be deduced from the authors, innovation should no longer be considered an extraordinary, external event disconnected from the territory, but it becomes a daily practice intimately linked to the community from which it originates, due precisely to the role played by LEADER. In this sense and as widely discussed in previous research, innovation cannot simply be based on mere technical and technological aspects but should focus on the context in a broader sense. Otherwise, local development projects risk being ineffective.

By adopting this conception, the LEADER approach therefore looks at the territory in its complexity and uniqueness, focusing attention mainly on intangible components of the territorial capital (Belliggiano et al., 2018; Labianca et al., 2020,). In this perspective the territory isn't “simply a

geographical extension of land or space within which a certain set of rules apply, or even as a technical support base for productive activities” but rather “a space not only for production but also for social reproduction”, in which the objectives must necessarily be defined starting from the bottom through a participatory, integrated approach (Labianca et al., 2020, p. 115). In this sense, on the basis of what is indicated from a programmatic point of view and as is explained more clearly later, it could be thought that the original orientation of LEADER is even more innovative, so much so that the approach is clearly visionary. This misunderstanding, especially on an operational level, probably made the process of change that the LEADER approach should have generated in local territories less effective. In fact, the visionary approach extends the conception of territory (territory reductively interpreted by policy makers as a passive support) but introduces innovative elements into planning and governance practices and styles.

These last aspects can be directly mediated by the most recent planning practices and international debates. Here, the planning designed for territorial development and its theories are re-proposed in a rural context in consideration of the ever reduced differences between rural and urban in the majority of rural areas in Europe and due to the policy innovations introduced especially in the last few decades. In fact, we assume that this can be useful to better understand some crucial aspects of the LEADER approach that are usually overshadowed especially at the operational level.

This analysis takes the well-known study on collaborative planning by Healey (1997) as one of its starting points. In particular, in local territories the first decisive phase is the impulse for the elaboration of a spatial strategy which usually arises from particular institutional situations both internal and external. In our case LEADER generates a local mobilization and a social and political impulse to do something about the issue. According to Healey, a situation of change arises when one goes beyond the feeling that "something must be done" to obtaining support for an organizational effort. In particular there must be a "moment of opportunity", generating changes in power relationships, a situation of

contradiction and conflict, which encourages people to recognize that they need collaborative planning processes, to reflect on what they are doing and recognize the need to work with different people. All this makes processes and territories evolve (Ibid., p. 269).

One of the critical resources at this stage is the ability to read the “cracks”, through which new ideas can seep, to see the opportunities to do things differently, and be able to enlarge a “crack” into a real potential for change. And it is precisely in these circumstances that specific actors have the ability to recognize moments of opportunity and mobilize networks around the idea of making an effort in the strategy process. In our case, under LEADER, these actors are the LAGs and the change generated, the new way of doing things, can under specific conditions be called, social innovations. In fact according to our previous research (Belliggiano et al., 2018; De Rubertis et al., 2018a; Labianca et al., 2020) based on Neumeier’s definition (2017, p. 35) these changes, if really incisive, produce organizational changes (collaborative modes of action or new governance structures at community or regional level) (Belliggiano et al., 2018; De Rubertis et al., 2018a; Labianca et al., 2020).

Social innovation can be considered a “fuzzy” concept widely used and also abused in recent policies because it has not been clarified enough both in the literature and in practice (Neumeier, 2017; Moulaert et al., 2005; Cloutier, 2003; Lacquement and Quèva, 2016; Moulaert and Mehmood, 2011). A critical review of the literature, according to our visionary approach, can help us to grasp the most significant elements of the concept (see Cloutier, 2013; Neumeier, 2017).

According to Moulaert and Mehmood (2011, p. 214), it is a complex and socially embedded concept, in fact “social innovation to be effective to the development of a community should therefore be path-dependent, spatially embedded and socially re (produced)”. It has a key role for local and regional development because it is able to stress “the use and organization of space as a new opportunity-set for change initiatives, by democratizing territorial governance dynamics and by linking local and regional bottom-up development agendas to the multi-scalar social relations that should enhance them” (Ibid., p. 221).

For Cloutier (2013), a social innovation is defined by its innovative or non-standard nature and by the general objective to promote the well-being of individuals and communities, therefore it has no particular form (procedural, organizational, institutional) and if we consider the territory, it derives from the cooperation between a variety of actors. From this perspective, social innovation can be seen as a collective process of learning and creating knowledge. Therefore it is a source of social change and can contribute to the emergence of a new model of development. Neumeier (2017, p. 35) introduces further elements for its identification, including the procedural steps defining it as «changes of attitudes, behaviour or perceptions of a group of people joined in a network of aligned interests that, in relation to the group's horizon of experiences, lead to new and improved ways of collaborative action within the group and beyond».

In the following table presented during the international Summer School held in Baeza³, the main characteristics were summarized in a table which shows some of the variables identified as relevant, such as the nature of the innovation, the process, the goals and the outcomes. The main characteristics allow us to identify social innovation and distinguish it from the routine kind. In fact, it is clearly relative because it is necessarily different and varies according to each context, so it is not generalizable, but every single territory must be considered in order to be adequately assessed. Moreover, it is out of the ordinary in view of the context, the user and the application so there is an inevitable comparison with the previous situation. It also produces substantial changes in the components underpinning the system such as values, beliefs, representations, tools / know-how and rules. It is capable of producing or enhancing social capital and another key element is the focus on local needs and capacity building.

³ International Summer School “Desarrollo y Cambio Rural en la Unión Europea. LEADER 2007-2013” - CSO2014-56223-P, International University Sede Antonio Machado – Baeza, Dirección Proff. Eugenio Cejudo García (University of Granada) and Francisco Antonio Navarro Valverde (University of Granada) (August, 2018).

Table 1. Social innovation: main characteristics.

What?	Nature/area	Innovative character	Process/ requirements	Goals	Outcome
A collective process of learning and creating knowledge for community wellbeing, new development model.	Not a specific form Organizational Procedural Practices Processes	Relative and extraordinary (user, context, application) Modification of the components on which the system is based (values, beliefs, representations, tools/know-how, rules)	Integral part of the process Learning and knowledge Empowerment and learning Requirements	Community and individual wellbeing Better quality of life Resolution of current problems/ prevention of future problems/local aspirations	Responds to needs more effectively than preexisting alternative Quality/long term solution New and improved means of collaborative action New governance dynamics/structures Empowerment and learning New asset building
Change in the attitudes, behaviour, perceptions of a group of people joined in a network of aligned interests that leads the group to new and improved ways of collaborative actions and beyond	Services Tangible product Multisectoral	Producing or enhancing social capital Deep changes Focusing on needs but especially on asset building	Diversity participation cooperation of actors (multiactors, strategic multidisciplinary, flexible positions...)		

Source: Our elaboration based on Neumeier, 2017 and Cloutier, 2013.

Therefore, it certainly starts from a common social problem but takes on a broader connotation, managing to achieve objectives linked to the quality and well-being of the entire community. It acts on the dynamics of governance, modifying roles and intervening in processes. As will be explained more clearly in relation to processes, it is an integral part of the process and it acts by substantially modifying the processes of learning and knowledge. It triggers local empowerment because it is based on essential conditions such as the real, proactive cooperation between actors coming from different multidisciplinary networks, from positions that cannot be rigid and hierarchical but, in our visionary interpretation, must necessarily be flexible.

In our comparative research, about the interpretation of innovation, a fundamental aspect emerging was that “the success of social innovation seems to be closely related to the quality of a set of physical-environmental and socio-cultural elements that authoritative literature calls territorial capital” (Belliggiano et al., 2018, p. 631). These innovations therefore require particular internal contextual conditions which cannot be ignored and which depend on the quality of the human, social and cultural capital present in the territories, in other words they are based on the creative and pro-active capacity of the actors.

In this regard Healey (1997), in discussing planning strategies, describes the actors capable of triggering these changes and recognizes that the “activators” have a crucial role in planning processes. They can arise from all types of institutional contexts and relationships, not necessarily formal, and their ability lies in being able to see and express possible territorially anchored strategies. They have “the capacity for an acute sense of the relation between the structural dynamics of local economic, social and political relations and how these are manifest in what particular people in a place are bothered about”. In the arenas of discussion “the initiators have to mobilise interest and engagement. This means thinking about who to get involved, where to meet and how to conduct discussion. These choices are critical, both in terms of the likely future support for, and ownership of, whatever emerges, and for whether the resultant

mobilisation effort is of a corporatist or inclusionary nature". Some people bear the responsibility for "initial moves" (Ibid., p. 270).

Therefore, two different approaches must be distinguished, that is, one characterized by democratic potential inclusion and the other which can strengthen the domination of a few powerful people. The first refers to an "inductive ethics", in which the question is to understand who the members of the community of stakeholders are and how they should obtain access to the arena so that their "points of view" can be appreciated and listened to, participating fully in the process. The second idea recognizes a change in the "where" of the strategic discussion, providing for different arenas and times, in which case the discussion passes from discursive "opening" to consolidation around consequent ideas, actions and values, generating the danger of a discursive closure toward the positions and problems raised earlier. Therefore what distinguishes the quality of an inclusive approach is the "style and ethics of the context" of the discussion enabling stakeholder awareness to be promoted and supported throughout the process, while focusing on all the requests raised by interested parties (Ibidem).

Moving on to visions and consensus building, it is inevitable to underline the shift from a rationalist technological perspective to a social-constructivist one, which broadly summarizes the main approaches to the analysis of planning policy. The rationalist approach was previously pervasive in planning and political practice and although it contains many ideas and principles, it is limited by "its assumptions of instrumental rationality and objective science" whose main failures were to re-propose visions of the future while maintaining the "status quo". The future was simply extrapolated from the past and little attention was paid to social issues (Ibidem).

By contrast, the social constructivist approach operates largely in the context of socially produced knowledge. In the interactive perspective, strategies and policies are not the result of objective technical processes, but are actively produced in social contexts. The cognitive style progressively prevails over the technical-scientific one, the planner himself is a "facilitator of the debate" rather than a "substantial expert", while the

process maintains an "open argument". The interactive approaches that have developed in this direction have shifted attention from questions concerning coordination mechanisms towards a greater "emphasis on the social construction of appreciation of problems and articulation of strategies". The interactive approaches that thus slowly developed in the discussion of decision making, however, concern coordination mechanisms, social construction and articulation of strategies (Ibid., pp. 248-254). Therefore, in the shift to a social constructivist position the production of knowledge and understanding "through social interactive processes decisively shifts the understanding of strategy-making work from analytical and managerial technologies to social ones" (Ibid., p. 258).

Starting from these reflections, in the following paragraphs, focusing on the basic elements of the LEADER approach, we will try to develop these points critically in more depth, through an examination of the most relevant literature and programmatic documents.