

Conference "New rural geographies in Europe: actors, processes, policies"
Braunschweig, June 14-17

“From LEADER to Community-Led Local Development: A critical perspective on European rural policies”

Luís Chaves, Minha Terra

The community initiative for rural development LEADER, launched in 1991, was an advanced initiative to promote new relations between public authorities and civil society, organised as local partnerships (Local Action Groups) in rural areas. This was a new form of governance, where different the actors of the same territory gained legitimacy to access to financial resources and act together in public life.

Since 1991, until the previous programming period, the number of Local Action Groups, the territory covered and the financial allocation to LEADER have always increased from programming period to programming period.

The presentation gives an overview on the evolution of European policies to support local development in the perspective of Local Action Groups (LAGs), based on ground experience of the Portuguese network of LAGs.

After 3 generations as Community Initiative, LEADER faced the first of two major traps: the "mainstreaming trap". In the transition from LEADER+ to the 2007-2013 programming period, LEADER practitioners and defenders were convinced that the LEADER method, with its principles (the bottom-up, partnership, integrated approach, etc.), should be capable to "contaminate" the Rural Development Programs.

In the preparation of the current programming period, the definition of the general framework of Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) in the EU, was supposed to extend LEADER heritage (or LEADER DNA) also to European Fund for Regional Development (EFRD) and European Social Fund (ESF). Once again, LEADER people started to defend and support this new framework, but the increasing complexity of dealing with several non-coordinated Management Authorities, several national or regional regulations and several IT systems, transformed CLLD in LEADER second trap, the "multi-fund trap".

There is an incoherence between policy objectives and policy tools that emerged with the mainstreaming of LEADER and is being confirmed with the multifunded CLLD.

How can LAGs design and implement solutions to problems to which conventional policies can no longer respond, if they are forced to follow the same conventional paths?

Present challenge is to avoid the consequences of these traps, and to contribute to the design of a really integrated and participatory territorial approach, with a relevant financial expression, an adequate monitoring and evaluation system recognized both by the local communities, the EU level, but also the Member State level in a partnership based on trust to the well-being of local communities.

Several LEADER practitioners and/or supporters – from ELARD to European think-tanks – are engaged in rethinking the renewal of LEADER in the current political, social and environmental context, putting forward the contribution of collaborative approaches based on the creativity and initiative of citizens and local communities.