

Toward an evaluation model for transnational cooperation activities in rural areas: a case study within an EU LEADER project

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Abstract. Cooperation activities between Local Action Groups (LAGs) have been introduced into EU LEADER (Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale) initiative to provide rural areas the opportunity to exchange experiences and best practices, as well as to realize common activities by pooling human and financial resources. The main purposes are to overcome isolation and add value to local development strategies. The benefits of cooperation are widely recognized but, undeniably, it can be also a difficult and time-consuming process. For this reason, evaluation is a necessary tool to measure the success of cooperation and to help actors address their strategies for the future. In this paper, an evaluation methodology is proposed and applied to an EU LEADER+ case study, the 'Integrated Project for Rural Tourism: Environment and Qualified Hospitality', a transnational cooperation experience led by LAG Aspromar, based in the province of Reggio Calabria, Southern Italy. Quantitative and qualitative data have been collected through the integration of three typical methods of social research: two techniques based on surveys, namely interviews with privileged actors, and a semi-structured questionnaire, and a technique based on non-survey data and the study of documents. Results can be useful to highlight pros and cons of the management of a cooperation project and to stimulate projects' leaders on activating improvement processes.

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1. Introduction

In European countries, transnational cooperation demands dealing with the necessity of implementing cohesion among the territories by shortening distances and pooling resources. This is to get best results and to strengthen the impacts of rural development actions; it is also necessary to give visibility and value to the human and natural resources of the European rural territories, thereby contributing to diminishing their differences in wealth.

The introduction of the cooperation activity in the EU Initiative LEADER, in fact, has been the institutionalization of a need already expressed by the European territories since the eighties. In the LEADER+ initiative, for the programming period 2000-2006, cooperation becomes an element of great importance, because it helps to create the conditions and attitudes to promote the exchange of methodologies for endogenous and sustainable local development. Achieving high levels of effectiveness and efficiency is possible if cooperation is interpreted not as a formality or bureaucracy, but as an integrated approach to territorial needs and, above all, one with the strong involvement of partners. Cooperation allows the involved territories to exchange ideas and experiences and stimulates the development of new solutions; the assumption of new perspectives and logics leads to the acquisition of skills that contribute to strengthening the social capital of the territories. However, cooperation is a demanding initiative and, to be successful, a sizable investment is necessary in terms of time and finan-

cial and human resources, leading to results that are not always satisfactory.

The remainder of this paper consists of six different sections. The next section examines the main characteristics, benefits, and issues of cooperation under LEADER+, and the main features of evaluation, a useful tool for controlling and assessing the success of a project. The third part illustrates the case study, (i.e. the 'Integrated Project for Rural Tourism: Environment and Qualified Hospitality'), an inter-territorial and transnational cooperation project promoted by LAG Aspromar based in South Italy, which involved five Calabrian LAGs, a Portuguese, and a Finnish LAG.

The project was aimed, above all, at the exchange of methodologies and best practices, but also toward the realization of activities on common development themes. A first main theme concerned the enhancement of rural tourism and the quality of supply, through diversification and enhancement of their specificities. In the long run, this would ensure greater income to local actors and less isolation in rural areas; a second main theme was concerned with the valorisation of forest resources and helping local actors introduce new practices for sustainable forestry.

After describing the partnership and the process that led to the final project, the methodological framework used to evaluate the cooperation project is illustrated in the fourth section. In particular, qualitative data have been collected through the integration of three typical methods of social research (Bailey, 1994): two techniques based on sur-

veys, namely interviews with privileged actors and a semi-structured questionnaire, and a technique based on non-survey data and on the study of official documents. The integrated methodology enabled the authors to detect project effects, make a comparison between expected and achieved results, and highlight the impacts of the project concerning the specific features of the LEADER initiative. The fifth section presents main results and, focusing on the experience of the project coordinators (LAG managers), it discusses what has been achieved, the lessons learned, and the difficulties encountered. The last section provides some conclusions in terms of the best results from the exchange of best practices; however, some failures occurred, and the study has highlighted their possible causes, thereby enabling some useful suggestions to be made for the future.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Cooperation in LEADER: Principles, benefits, and issues

The genesis of cooperation activities between European areas can be traced back to 1989 when, some cross-border pilot projects were activated to lay the foundations of the INTERREG initiative. INTERREG represent the most important programme funded by European Union's (EU) Cohesion Policy aimed to promote the "European Territorial Cooperation" at three levels of geographical dimension: cross-border cooperation; transnational cooperation and inter-regional cooperation (Colomb, 2007; 2017). Especially transnational cooperation can be seen as "an exercise of learning by doing" (Dühr and Nadin, 2007:375), addressed to intangible outcomes or learning by following the so-called "best-practice approach" to share experiences, innovative and exemplary practices and transfer know-how (Knippschild and Vock, 2017).

Purposely for rural areas, the European financial support for cooperation activities has been introduced in the LEADER initiative by its second phase, namely LEADER II (programming period 1994-1999), in terms of meeting the needs of rural

areas for overcoming isolation, exchanging competences, and networking. A comprehensive deepening about LEADER can be found in Arroyo et al. (2014), Pollerman et al. (2013) Furmankiewicz and Macken-Walsh (2016), Magnani and Struffi (2009), Navarro et al. (2015), Papadopoulou et al. (2011), Rizzo (2013), Osti (2000). In the period that followed (2000-2006), cooperation became a fundamental component; the LEADER+ program dedicated a specific axis, the second, to the creation of cooperative relations between local development groups.

The Commission Notice of 14 April 2000 (2000/C 139/05) (European Commission, 2000) indicated that the strengths of the LEADER approach, among others, were the mobilization of local actors and the opening-up of rural areas to other territories through experience exchanges. Moreover, the European Commission gave LAGs the opportunity to cooperate with rural areas belonging to the same Member State (inter-territorial cooperation), to another Member State (trans-national cooperation), or even to non-EU rural groups organized with a similar bottom-up approach (although the latter were not eligible for European financing).

To achieve what Ray (2001) called a true "dynamic and inter-local connectivity", the European Commission stated the need for cooperation to include the implementation of joint actions, like the creation of goods or services, supported by a common structure if possible, and not simply consist of exchanges of experience. LEADER cooperation should allow rural groups to pool know-how, human, and financial resources; to exchange best practices and experiences through networking; and to reach the necessary critical mass to create a common product (European Commission, 2000), but also to take advantage of similarities and complementarity (LEADER European Observatory, 1999). Partnership and networking were key features both in local strategies and cooperation projects, the importance of which has been confirmed in the programming period 2007-2013 by Reg. (EC) n. 1698/2005, as well as in 2014-2020. They can be considered essential tools at the local level to realize the bottom-up approach and to enhance local governance; at the extra-local level they are the core of cooperation itself. Moreover, Lukesch (2007:12) has highlighted a connection between local and extra-local cooperation,

affirming that “the way a local partnership cooperates with other areas and participates in global networks - aimed at achieving knowledge transfer and mutual exchange - mirrors the communication capacities that it has acquired at the local level where internal and external networking are two sides of the same coin”.

Many scholars and experts (Ray, 2001; Rete LEADER, 2006, 2007; Duguet, 2007; Unité Nationale d'Animation LEADER+, 2007; Lesmeister, 2009), have highlighted the potential results of cooperation; according to them, it is possible to point out three main kinds of benefits, regarding the economic and social aspects, and features of governance. Furthermore, it is possible to distinguish these benefits according to the time they require to appear from the implementation of actions. That is, short- and mid-term benefits are more easily perceived while long-term effects may be less tangible thus difficult to detect, to measure, and to attribute solely to cooperation. From an economic point of view, short- and mid-term benefits can bring about several possibilities: accessing further funds, reaching a critical mass by linking many stakeholders together, creating economies of scale by sharing factors of production, developing new products, entering new markets, or consolidating existing ones by pooling resources and technologies, and finally, increasing incomes and improving supply quality. From a social point of view, in the short- and mid-term, benefits are attributable to the increase in employment that, in turn, restrains depopulation, a diffused phenomenon in those rural areas that are more isolated or inland; networking, at the local level and between different rural areas, creates relationships and so increases social capital. Long-term social benefits are recognizable in strengthened relations among actors, which involves the consolidation of social capital created in the short and mid-term between local and external actors.

Finally, cooperation can help to improve the capacity building of territories, which is referred to as “strengthening abilities, relationships, and values that enable organizations, groups, and individuals to improve their performance and achieve their sustainable development objectives” (UNEP, 2004:1). It is achievable, for example, through comparing methods and the program functions of other partners, and learning new technical skills, particular-

ly when managers and local decision-making actors are involved. Capacity building directly deals with the third category of benefits provided by cooperation, that is, those regarding features of governance. In fact, in the short- and mid-term, cooperation provides the possibility of acquiring new capabilities and strategies (e.g. concerning integrated planning and sustainable management of resources); the expertise gained can increase the legitimacy of the local actors as protagonists of the bottom-up approach of governance (Lukesch, 2007).

In the long run, the benefits of governance become part of the ownership and empowerment of local actors, the application of policies created from the bottom-up, namely the territory, and capacity building that allows for managing resources in a sustainable way. Finally, we can summarize LEADER cooperation benefits through giving rural development one more chance by extending and boosting territorial strategies (Unité Nationale d'Animation LEADER+, 2007). The added value of cooperation remains in the introduction of new solutions for local challenges, and in those activities that otherwise would have been impossible to realize because of the small amount of available capital. To achieve the benefits explained above, the European Commission (2000) established two possible kind of actions: the exchange of know-how and best practices, and the potential realization of a common product or a joint action. Moreover, the Commission pushed LAGs into undertaking actions not only aimed at experience exchanges but also at the implementation of a joint project. As highlighted by some national coordination units and experts (Rete LEADER, 2007; Unité Nationale d'Animation LEADER+, 2007; Duguet, 2007), LEADER cooperation offers a wide range of possible activities.

For example, concerning the realization of common products, cooperation activities can deal with the realization of studies, research, methodological guides, and didactic material through deepening and disseminating knowledge about common issues, and through testing new solutions. In particular, joint product bundling, the creation of new products (goods or services), and the promotion of common itineraries, allow for taking advantage of similarities and complementarities, and widening and diversifying supply. This is the case, for example, with those territories that have a common his-

tory and tradition, or which produce products that can be offered together (handcrafts, foodstuffs, tourist routes). Finally, the creation of consortiums or cooperatives can help to reach a critical mass by pooling resources and entering new markets, or reinforcing those that already exist; this type of collaboration can also allow the creation of pressure groups aimed at influencing politics at the local or extra-local level (D'Amico et al., 2013; De Devitiis et al., 2012a, 2012b; De Luca et al., 2016).

The European Commission gave LAGs the possibility of undertaking cooperation projects on four main themes: enhancement of local products, of natural and cultural resources, use of know-how and new technologies, and improvement of quality of life in rural areas (Rete LEADER, 2008). In the 2007–2013 period, when LEADER became an approach in the Rural Development Program, the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD, 2010) recognized different added-value aspects of cooperation: strengthening territorial strategy and local partnerships, making projects more ambitious about reaching critical mass, improving competitiveness by finding new business partners, and positioning in new markets to support work and promote innovation through new skills and a developing territorial identity. It is noteworthy that these are all values impossible to reach without a cooperation project.

Yet despite offering the possibility of several benefits that are not always easy to achieve, cooperation requires many human and economic resources and it is a time-consuming process; to be effective it is necessary to take into account the effort required and the difficulties that may occur during the planning and the implementation phases. According to Rete LEADER (2007) and Unité Nationale d'Animation LEADER+ (2007), endogenous difficulties can emerge because of cultural and linguistic differences, logistic troubles due to distances and, above all, to various coordination and information problems. Moreover, partnerships can show some weaknesses in their different expectations, capabilities, methodologies, and the degree of partners' involvement; the numerical composition of partnership and a possible rigidity of mind can also be influential. Exogenous difficulties are considered external factors because they are outside of the partner's control; in fact, they include, for example, different levels of fi-

nancial availability, rules and procedures, the Managing Authorities' (MAs) bureaucracy and timing, and the cultural environment in which LAGs work.

To overcome constraints and difficulties, it is fundamental to realistically consider all such aspects from the beginning. Intense communication and clarity among local partners, and between them and cooperation partners throughout the process can help to solve internal difficulties. Furthermore, acquiring the most information possible about partners' functions and their MA can help in preventing those difficulties that are outside of the LAGs' control.

2.2. Methodological aspects of cooperation planning

Many cooperation guides have been published during LEADER programming periods to give methodological inputs to LAGs about the planning and implementation phases (e.g. Unité Nationale d'Animation LEADER+, 2004, 2007; Rete LEADER, 2007; Polish MARD, 2012; ENRD, 2010; LEADER European Observatory, 2001). According to them, it is possible to highlight some essentials steps.

As cooperation is a useful tool to boost local strategies and to find new solutions to local problems, the first step concerns the identification of the cooperation theme. It can regard the analysis phase of the Local Development Plan (LDP) that enables planners to highlight those problems that could not be solved or would be less efficiently solved without cooperation. Otherwise, the cooperation theme can emerge from potential target groups asking for new strategies and know-how, or it can be chosen to be consistent with previous or existing projects (Polish MARD, 2012). In any case, comparing local development themes with endogenous resources (physic and social ones) can identify cooperation needs and expectations.

The principal addressees of every project aimed at local development are the local actors, whose participation is a central concern in LEADER. For cooperation to succeed, a second step involves identifying stakeholders who are likely to get involved, including providers of co-financing or promoters, and raising their awareness about the added value

of cooperation. The result of this second step is a measure of the degree of openness in the territory (Unité Nationale d'Animation LEADER+, 2007). Stakeholders can be involved through interviews or the organization of events, such as seminars and congresses. Once priorities have been identified and ranked, and the general objectives of cooperation are clear at the local level, LAGs can start looking for partners, who can be chosen according to several criteria, including the main theme of their LDP or characteristics of their area, similar cultural issues, complementary experiences or know-how, resource availability, and many other criteria (Unité Nationale d'Animation LEADER+, 2007).

Partners can be found responding to an existing cooperation proposal or by launching a new one, thanks to the many tools made available by the European or national coordination units, such as cooperation web platforms, networks, databases, newsletters, or events organized at the international level. Consolidated relationships derived from previous experiences can also be an efficient way to create a partnership (Unité Nationale d'Animation LEADER+, 2007). To make this step most efficiently, it may be useful to draft a cooperation advertisement or a project summary to help potential partners focus on the cooperation objectives and to understand main topics and expected results. To add value to the proposal, it is also suggested that the possibility of discussing partners' ideas be indicated in the proposal (ENRD, 2010).

However, before starting the cooperation project, it is important to take into account all those internal and external constraints that could impede its implementation, thereby avoiding loss of time and resources. Concerning internal constraints, Rete LEADER (2007) suggested a preliminary evaluation of feasibility (timing, availability of resources, and local actors' willingness to participate), and sustainability (a guarantee of continuity in actions and benefits); external constraints refer, for example, to bureaucratic procedures, normative fulfilment, logistics, and other requirements. The subsequent step concerns making the cooperation partnership official and formalizing the project in a concrete form, for example by signing letters of intent. From this moment on, the lead partner has the important responsibility of coordinating the others, and ensuring continuous work as well as an efficient circu-

lation of information. Each partner carries out its responsibilities at the local and transnational level and mobilizes the necessary technical and financial resources; LAGs with less experience in cooperation can involve external experts with the necessary skills to ensure that the cooperation is successful. Every LAG's funding application entails bureaucratic requirements; the evaluation and approval process of each one can vary considerably and, for this reason, it is necessary to acquire as much information in advance as possible, as delays may badly influence the normal implementation of the project.

Once the projects are approved by the MAs, the implementation can start and LAGs can steer their cooperation action administratively and in operational terms; at this point, LAGs must contract with their MA, and cooperation partners must formalize their partnership through a cooperation agreement, if another kind of joint organization is not already formalized (Unité Nationale d'Animation LEADER+, 2007). A cooperation agreement (Rete LEADER, 2006) is an actual written contract, through which LAGs acquire rights and assume obligations to the partnership. It contains objectives and actions, it describes the roles, functions, and commitments of the lead partner and the others, the financial dimension of each activity, and the budget committed by each partner. It also monitors the rules in case of the entry of new partners or the withdrawal of others, the applicable law - that must be recognized by at least one of the Member States involved - and the relevant court. The cooperation agreement regulates the eventual establishment of common structures, such as the European Interest Economic Group (EIEG), a consortium, or a European Cooperative Society. A steering committee can support the lead partner in detailing and carrying out the project by convening meetings or video conferences.

The arrangements for financing the cooperation projects under LEADER+ differ from one LAG area to another, depending very often on the administrative and institutional backgrounds of the regions and the Member States. In some cases, financial resources for cooperation were assigned to LAGs when they were selected and thus they had some appropriations available in advance. In other cases, the authority in charge representing LEADER implemented the cooperation axis through calls for

tenders by fixed deadlines; finally, in some cases cooperation has been implemented for a continuous period as proposals arose from LEADER groups to the regional level (European Commission, 2004a).

Another important step for cooperation implementation, as suggested by Unité Nationale d'Animation LEADER+ (2007), is defining an evaluation tool: this is essential both *in itinere* to adapt actions and make adjustments if needed, and *ex post* to assess and verify the fulfilment of objectives and expected results. Moreover, evaluation can be allocated to internal staff (self-evaluation) or to external experts and it can be made participatory through the involvement of local actors. Finally, evaluation is a helpful tool to measure the added value of cooperation and to learn lessons for the future. To conduct a successful assessment, quantitative and qualitative indicators are required, such as the number of products, beneficiaries reached, practices disseminated, job created (in the first instance), or impacts on the environment, society, or the economy, as well as effects on local governance (including those that are secondary). During the programming period 2007–2013, the LEADER programme in Italy accounted 94 cooperation projects realized by 164 LAGs, of which 57 projects of inter-territorial cooperation and 37 projects of transnational cooperation. In this last projects' typology 92 Italian LAGs were involved with 18 LAGs of other EU countries. Public resources are destined for 52,864 million of euros, with an average budget for LAGs of about 320 thousand euros (Rete Rurale Nazionale, 2015).

2.3. Some evaluation suggestions within the LEADER framework

“Although the Initiative [LEADER] represents a very modest share of the Structural Funds, the evaluation work that actually needs to be done is in fact more complex than for other EU interventions. If the methodology for the first type of evaluation is fairly well established, a methodology for evaluating the unique aspects of LEADER has not yet been put forward” (LEADER European Observatory, 1999:11).

This was the vision of the LEADER European Observatory concerning the evaluation activities

of the LEADER II initiative started in 1994. After six years, the significance of the evaluation activities was confirmed by the Commission notice to the Member States: “the relevant provisions on evaluation in the general Regulation and the guidelines for evaluating rural development, will apply, where appropriate, to LEADER+”. In view of the specific characteristics of LEADER, the evaluation exercise, while drawing on physical and financial indicators, will also be supplemented by specific indicators relating in particular to the integrated territorial approach, the pilot nature of the actions, the operation of the partnership, the organization, and role of the participating administrative structures, networking, and the environmental impact” (European Commission, 2000:11).

To identify the significance of the LEADER approach and its possible territorial impact, the LEADER ‘specificities’ should primarily be considered (i.e. all the characteristics that make it different from the other programming instruments supported by EU structural funds). In particular, we refer to these ‘specificities’ or ‘features’ representing the ‘added value’ of LEADER and of its operational method (LEADER European Observatory, 1999). Each one of these specificities is a key factor for LEADER success and is directly related to several local factors existing in a territory (e.g. rural context, local actors, and institutional background); consequently, each of the specificities has a strong influence on the traditional evaluation indicators (i.e. financial, physical, and procedural results). Therefore, in the assessment processes of LEADER, the main difficulties are frequently related to the measurement of its specificities or, more properly expressed, of its intangible character. Measuring how far these specific characters, or a combination of them, contribute to achieving the project results is even more complicated.

The official European guidelines for the Evaluation of LEADER+ Programmes suggest a common set of evaluation questions with the purpose of allowing a global analysis concerning the general objectives and the implementation methodology (European Commission, 2004a). One or more criteria are linked to each question and are useful for assessing the program with reference to the expected results or impacts relative to the following aspects:

Questions regarding the implementation of the LEADER+ method;

Action-specific questions;

Questions regarding the impact of the program on the territory in regard to the general objectives of the structural funds;

Questions regarding the impact of the program on the territory in regard to the specific objectives of LEADER+;

Specific methods for financing, managing, and evaluating LEADER+ and its effect on the implementation and impact of the program.

In addition to these common evaluation questions, the national or regional MAs must delineate some questions concerning the specific objectives of their LEADER programs, strategies of action, and territorial context.

However, the European common evaluation questions do not specifically refer to evaluation at the local level. Furthermore, according to several authors, the assessment of rural development projects, like LEADER ones, can be a complex and variable procedure, depending on the territorial context, the exigencies, the socio-economic features and the aims to be achieved (Tirado Ballesteros and Hernandez, 2017). This is the reason why, increasingly, new evaluation approaches are needed as suggested by several authors.

In this sense, it could be more useful to refer to the experiences of internal assessment, self-assessment, or participatory evaluation that are already occurring in LEADER and are now largely widespread in the specific literature on the assessment methodologies (Keränen, 2003; Lahtinen et al., 2004; Vinas, 2004; Marangoni, 2000; Thirion, 2000; Nazzaruolo, 2006; De Los Ríos-Carmenado et al. 2012; Prager et al., 2015).

3. The case study - An integrated project for rural tourism: environment and qualified hospitality

3.1. The LAG Aspromar and premises of cooperation project planning

LAG Aspromar was a temporary association of companies established in 2001 during the programming period 2000-2006 under the EU LEADER+ Initiative. The internal governance was organized into several bodies with different roles and degrees of responsibility. In particular, the Board of Directors was the political and decisional body; the Socio-Economic Partnership (SEP), which acted as support to the Board of Directors, was the result of a participatory process and therefore a technical and political body representing the territory that interacted with the Consultation Boards. The SEP was composed of about a hundred private and public members that could be divided into three groups: political actors (e.g. municipality entities or other public bodies); technicians (e.g. the local university or LAG's internal staff); and associations (e.g. confederacies of professionals, trade unions, social cooperatives, and environmental associations). The Board of Directors supervised some managers, among whom was the technical director, who in turn coordinated the technical staff responsible for the implementation of the strategy.

LAG Aspromar gathered private and public partners whose common aim was the rural development of an area of 44 municipalities on the Tyrrhenian side of the province of Reggio Calabria, in Southern Italy. The area covered a surface of 1,136.98 square kilometres, with 207,705 inhabitants in the year 2003 and with a population density of about 182.68 people per square kilometre. Concerning geographical characteristics and according to the ISTAT classification method, the presence of littoral hills was prevalent (41% of municipalities), followed by littoral mountains (34%), flatlands (18%), and internal mountains (7%). About 80% of the coast, from Palmi to Villa San Giovanni, is commonly known as the Costa Viola (purple coast), probably because of the colour of the sea water at some times of the day, but it is also famous for its terraced vineyards with dry stone walls called 'armacie'. In Costa Viola, Scilla is the most renowned tourist destination, with a coastal borough - Chianalea - that is included on UNESCO's world heritage list; Bagnara Calabria is the most important fishery area as the majority of fishing boats are registered there (GAL Aspromar, 2003). The flatlands landscape is dominated by citrus and olive groves (with many centennial olive trees) and the presence of Gioia Tauro's port, the

busiest and largest container terminal in Italy and the Mediterranean coast, and the seventh largest container port in Europe is important. The town of Villa San Giovanni also deserves attention, as it is a waypoint for the traffic to/from Sicily. The eastern side of the LAG area is covered by forests, protected by the National Park Aspromonte.

The LAG Aspromar's development strategy consisted of an integrated plan, the 'Reggino Versante Tirrenico' LDP, articulated in sections, measures, and interventions. It was the result of several methodological steps, the main ones of which were a territorial analysis that enabled a focus on development needs (SWOT), stakeholder involvement, and participation that led to the establishment of the SEP, and a synthesis of priorities that allowed the planners, through the application of multicriteria techniques (i.e. the analytic hierarchy process) (AHP) (Calabrò et al., 2005), to allocate financial resources to every intervention. Once approved by the Regional Authority, the LDP implementation consisted of realizing several projects through calls for applications or direct selections, with a total budget of €900,000 funded by the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF) and by private contributions (GAL Aspromar, 2003).

Taking into account the wealth of endogenous resources, but also the weaknesses of the area, as well as regional economic trends, the LAG Aspromar chose the promotion of rural tourism as the main theme of the LDP, identifying this sector as a significant and potential source of economic development. This choice was made by considering local and regional data on tourism (GAL Aspromar, 2003). First, the presence of several valuable resources for rural tourism, such as landscapes, forests, rural and coastal boroughs, and traditional products were taken into account. Second, tourism trends showed an increase, with Italian tourists preferring traditional accommodations, and foreigners preferring alternative ones. Tourist flows were characterized by high seasonality, a strong dependence on internal and national tourism, and a loss in the economic value of tourists due to an increase in arrivals but a decrease in stays. Furthermore, the level of the tourism infrastructures was medium to low, suggesting that it was deficient in services but well organized for mass tourism in summer (GAL Aspromar, 2003).

In light of these factors, the LAG Aspromar planned a strategy with two general objectives: promoting rural tourism to improve the development and the quality of life in rural areas, and promoting the valorization of local resources, such as the environment, natural heritage, and human capital.

LAG Aspromar's LDP was divided into two sections, the first one dedicated to local pilot strategies for rural development, and the second to inter-territorial and transnational cooperation between rural areas. Specifically, local strategies were organized according to several measures: technical assistance to rural development (measure 1.1), qualification and innovation in local production and valorization of local resources (measures 1.2 and 1.3), improvement in quality of life (measure 1.4), education/training of local actors (measure 1.5), creation of new services to support local businesses, and creation of networks to overcome their isolation (measure 1.6). Concerning the second section of the LDP, the LAG Aspromar considered it useful to share experiences with other LAGs, and especially those that were dealing with similar problems or had similar opportunities. Furthermore, the Commission Notice to the Member States of 14 April 2000 (2000/C 139/05) set out guidelines for LEADER+ and exhorted LAGs to use the cooperation tool not only to exchange best practices and know-how but, above all, to develop joined actions for the creation of common products (goods or services) so as to achieve the necessary critical mass. In fact, there was a requirement that genuine added-value cooperation for the rural areas concerned had to be demonstrated.

These were the principal reasons that LAG Aspromar chose to be engaged in the cooperation project as the lead partner, namely to enrich the local development strategy, exchange experiences, and find scale economies by developing joint actions.

3.2 Methodological steps of the planning process

As explained previously and illustrated in Fig. 1, the territorial analysis adopted by LAG Aspromar highlighted some cooperation needs that resulted from comparison of the development objectives

and the endogenous resources available. In particular, the technical staff noticed the need for a better organization of the tourist offer, a superior quality of tourist services, and the necessity of adding value to local resources. As the principal beneficiaries of a development project are the local actors, the participation of stakeholders in the planning process was important for two main reasons: measuring the degree of openness to cooperation in the territory, and ensuring that planning actions would be relevant to actual stakeholder needs. The territorial participation phase highlighted the fact that local resources (socio-economic and environmental ones) were isolated and unconnected, with a low-level of internal organization in the provisions for rural tourism;

these reasons indicated a need for networks to create synergies.

Once priorities and general objectives had been highlighted, LAG Aspromar started the research on partners who proposed themselves as lead partner, partly through the tools created by the national network for rural development (the national coordination unit for the Italian LEADER+) available on the Internet, and partly through prior relationship 'capital'. The cooperation partnership formation was very time consuming. One year after the approval of LAG Aspromar LDP in 2004, three meetings had been carried out, with the purpose of deepening mutual knowledge (Table 1), and comparing the expectations and needs of each potential partner (Table 2) (De Luca et al., 2010, 2011). The first

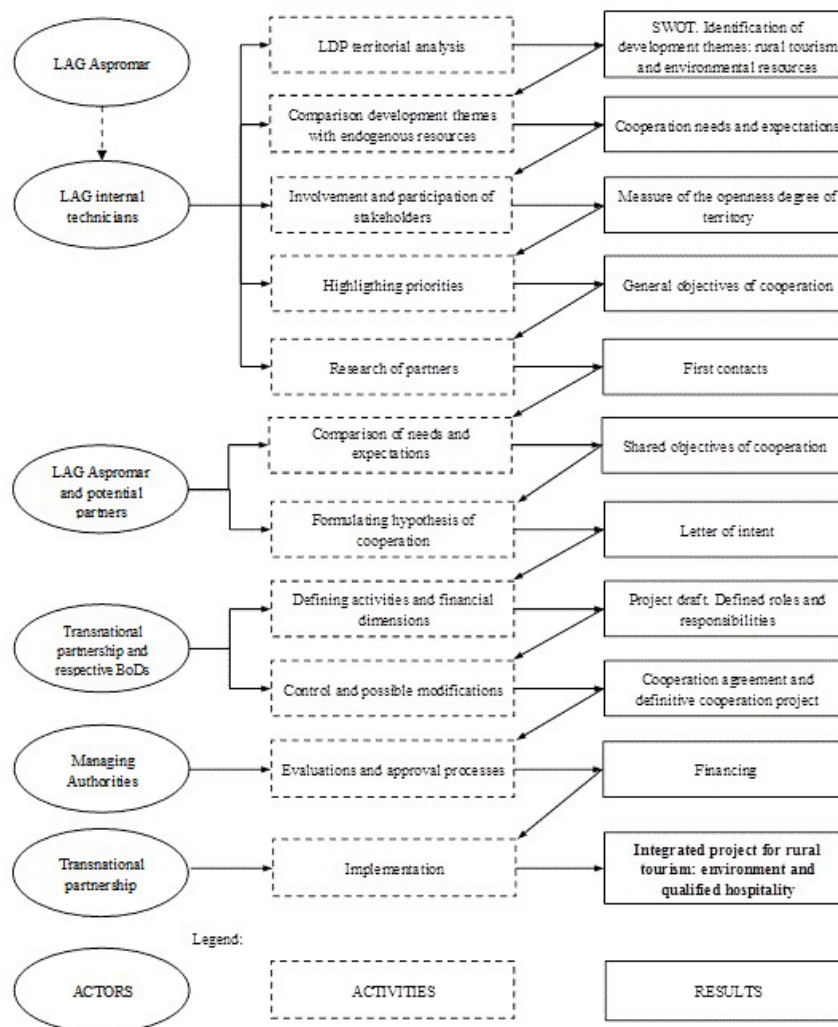


Fig. 1. Methodological synthesis of the cooperation planning process

Source: Authors

meeting took place in Ancona (Marche Region in Italy) with the LAG Flaminia Cesano as host partner, LAG Linnaseutu ry (Finland), and LAG Aspromar as guests; objective encounters allowed the partners to understand that LAG Flaminia Cesano had no interest in cooperating with the other partners because of a lack of relevance between its LDP themes and their own. A second meeting held in Finland enabled the partners to formulate hypothesis of cooperation and to outline their general common aims; a third meeting (in December 2004) was undertaken in Teleorman county with the Romanian partners, who at that time did not yet belong to a Member State of the European Union: in fact, they were an association of the municipalities organized according to the LEADER approach. Other meetings were carried out during 2005 in Italy and abroad as part of the partnership creation process. This allowed the partners to focus on shared operational objectives formalized through signing letters of intent; define activities, roles and responsibilities; and allocate financial resources.

In total, the partnership creation process took more than a year. The definitive 'Integrated Project for Rural Tourism: Environment and Qualified Hospitality' and cooperation agreement was submitted to each Managing Authority by every partner during 2005 (De Luca et al., 2010, 2011). The final transnational and inter-territorial partnership was composed of five Calabrian LAGs (LAG Krotton, LAG Pollino Sviluppo, LAG Locride Grecanica, LAG Valle del Crocchio and LAG Aspromar as lead partner), a Finnish LAG (Linnaseutu ry), and a Portuguese one (AProDeR, Associação para a Promoção do Desenvolvimento Rural do Ribatejo); the latter had already cooperated with the LAG Aspromar in the Paralelo 40 project under LEADER II.

Concerning the implementation, the partners set themselves two general objectives - the promotion and valorisation of their territories and exchanging best practices and know-how. To achieve these, two specific objectives became the focus, and then were divided into several operational objectives: the first was to do with the qualification of the rural tourism offer, especially in identifying synergies between local actors, and a second concerned with the valorisation and sustainable management of forest resources, in order to take advantage of their multifunctional characteristics.

As part of the project cycle, but also as one "of the most important tools for enhancing development effectiveness" (Ravallion, 2009: 49), evaluation is important and useful in highlighting the success and failures of planning processes and implementation effects. Anything but simple, evaluation must be as systematic and objective as possible to assess the relevance of activities to needs satisfaction, the fulfilment of objectives, developmental efficiency, effectiveness, impact, and sustainability (Garbarino and Holland, 2009).

The measurability of cooperation effects is a challenge for evaluators, and the authors attempted to overcome this critical aspect by processing qualitative and quantitative data collected through document analysis and a questionnaire submitted to privileged subjects of the cooperation partnership.

4. A methodology to evaluate the transnational cooperation project

4.1. Purpose of the evaluation and survey framework

Figure 2 summarizes the methodological process of the cooperation project from planning to implementation, to highlight the boundaries of the evaluation field. As explained previously, the territorial analysis carried out by LAG Aspromar technicians highlighted some issues and problems for which local resources would have been insufficient, thereby constituting the cooperation needs of the territory (Rete LEADER, 2007), namely the necessity to share know-how and pool resources with other rural areas.

Comparing local needs with other potential partners allowed the establishment of cooperation themes, objectives, and the development of activities. The evaluation required the collection of quantitative and qualitative data; the authors integrated three typical social research methods (Bailey, 1994): two techniques based on surveys, interviews with privileged actors through a semi-structured questionnaire, and a technique based on non-survey data—the documents study.

Table 1. Main characteristics of cooperation partners

	LAG Aspromar	LAG Linnaseutury	LAG Aproder	LAG Kroton	LAG Pollino Sviluppo	LAG Locride Grecanica	LAG Valle del Crocchio
Area - Region - Country	Reggino Versante Tirrenico (Calabria)	Häme Sub-region (Fi)	Ribatejo (Pt)	Province of Crotona (Calabria)	Northern province of Cosenza (Calabria)	Eastern province of Reggio C. (Calabria)	Northern province of Catanzaro (Calabria)
Objective regions	1	2	2	1	1	1	1
Experience under LEADER I	NO	NO	Not Available	NO	NO	NO	NO
Experience under LEADER II	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Main LDP objectives	Valorisation of rural tourism, protection of landscape, improvement of area activity	Valorisation of cultural heritage and natural resources	Valorisation of local products	Valorisation of local products, cultural heritage and natural resources. Rehabilitation of sites with high cultural and environmental value	Rural tourism, valorisation of natural and cultural resources, support to farms, SME, artisans	Rural tourism, Valorisation of archaeological sites, cultural heritage	Valorisation of natural and cultural resources, rural tourism, connections between local resources, integration between economic sectors
Inhabitants	208,494	55,039	88,910	113,112	52,120	147,000	58,838
LAG area description	Variegated landscape, going from littoral hills (41% of municipalities) and littoral mountains (34% of municipalities), followed by flatlands (most of which interested by olive and citrus groves) and internal mountains. Eastern municipalities fell in the Aspromonte National Park. The coast (Costa Viola) was an attraction for tourists. About the 18% of the total surface of the area was covered by forests.	Small rural villages, some of them isolated. The town of Hämeenlinna was the capital of the LAG area. An old castle rose in the heart of Hämeenlinna and next to the beautiful Vanajavesi lake. Several natural resources characterized the area, like forests and lakes.	Rural landscape divided in 3 main typologies: "campo", "bairro" and "charneca". An important Natural Park (Serras de Aire e Candeeiros) interested the area. The Ribatejo agriculture had the highest productivity of the country. Worthy of mention were the supply chains of oil, wine, forests, and rural tourism.	The area corresponded to the ancient property of the marquise of Crotona, an area delimited by the Gariglione Mountain (Sila), the mouths of Fiumenica and Tacina rivers and the Ionian sea, whose coasts offered important tourism and archeological sites.	A 114,000 hectares area in Northern Calabria region. About the 60% of the area was interested by the Pollino Mountains, protected by the Pollino National Park. Natural tourism was well developed.	The landscape was characterized by the presence of hills, uplands and torrents. The most part of the area was interested by agro-forestry activities. Many important archeological sites characterized the area. Tourism was a driving sector of the local economy.	The area was partly interested by the Sila National Park and it was touched by the Ionian sea, creating a variegated landscape. Presence of many valuable rural and natural sites.
Previous experiences in cooperation	YES	YES	YES	YES	Not Available	YES	YES
Had already cooperate with a LAG of the current partnership	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Source: Our elaboration from LAG Aspromar internal cooperation documents (unpublished); GAL Aspromar (2005); De Luca et al. 2011; www.linnaseutu.fi; www.aproder.pt; www.ilearning.reteleader.it.

Table 2. Needs and expectations of cooperation partners

5 Calabrian LAGs (It)		APRODER (Pt)	LINNASEUTURY (Fi)
Qualification of rural tourism supply	Strengths	Valuable natural, cultural and historical resources. Variegated landscape heritage. Deep rooted traditions. Experience in integrated planning.	Strong cultural and artisan traditions. Typical and traditional foodstuffs. Variegated landscape heritage. Experience in integrated planning. Experience in rural tourism development.
	Problems and weaknesses	Strong seasonality of tourism. Lack of laws that discipline rural tourism. Weak visibility of territories. Low-level quality of accommodation systems. Local resources isolated and little usable. Strong dependence by national and regional tourism: low capacity of attraction.	Attractive natural resources, like forests and lakes. Strong presence of traditions. Strong presence of associations, consortium, cooperatives. Attention to ecological aspects. Practices of sustainable forestry diffused
Valorization and sustainable management of forest resources	Strengths	Important forest heritage, of high productive and environmental value. Experience in integrated planning.	Weak economic sector in little rural villages, depopulation. Isolation of rural communities.
	Problems and weaknesses	No use of certifications for forest products, processes or management. Lacking attention to sustainable management themes. Low environmental awareness.	Forestry incomes significant for the local economy. Good practices of sustainable management of forests. Strong relation between rural communities and nature: environmental consciousness. Forest-wood supply chain well developed. Certifications FFCS.
COOPERATION NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS		Difficulties in organizing joint commercialization of products.	Overexploitation, due to forestry, depletes soil and ecosystems and threatens biodiversity
		Networking and improvement of rural tourism supply. Improving supply chain performance through joint actions. Networking between local actors and transnational cooperation partners. Exchanging experience and best practices about rural tourism and sustainable forestry.	Innovative ideas to improve the quality of life in small rural communities. Network of rural tourism supplier. Participation of stakeholders in transnational partnerships. Exchanging know-how and best practices about integrated planning. Methods for conservation of biodiversity. New markets for forest foodstuffs and woody products.

Source: Our elaboration on GAL Aspromar (2005) and LAG's internal documents (unpublished); De Luca et al. (2011).

The last technique has been the first step: the LAG Aspromar made available some internal documents including the LDP, the project file, the minutes, reports, brochures, and unpublished products; by analysing these documents, the authors could study and retrace the project cycle. Thanks to the preliminary analysis of the LDP and the cooperation project file, LAG technicians began by highlighting problems and cooperation needs; they paid particular attention to retracing meaningful connections among issues, which allowed them to build a problem tree according to cause-effect relationships, and thereby make logical connections between problems and objectives, and between means and purposes (European Commission, 2004b).

Cooperation activities have been divided by themes (rural tourism and sustainable forestry) and objectives; once the semantic field of operative and specific objectives was explored (Bezzi, 2007), the indicators of results were described. In particular, relevant expected outputs for each activity

were deduced from the project file, while expected outcomes were anticipated by taking into consideration the contexts in which the cooperation project has been implemented. Impacts have been deduced according to the main objectives described in the project file. This first step allowed Table 3 to be drafted. Once expected results were quantified, a second step was adopted to identify data on realization through the analysis of further documents (e.g. minutes, reports, articles), and the semi-structured questionnaire interviews with privileged subjects (LAG managers).

The information collected through the semi-structured questionnaire allowed the researchers to analyse the partnership development process in-depth, including the project planning and the implementation. In particular, the existence of good practices or difficulties encountered were analysed. The administered questionnaire (Fig. 3) has been divided into three main sections which, in turn, are divided into specific sub-sections: (1) a descriptive

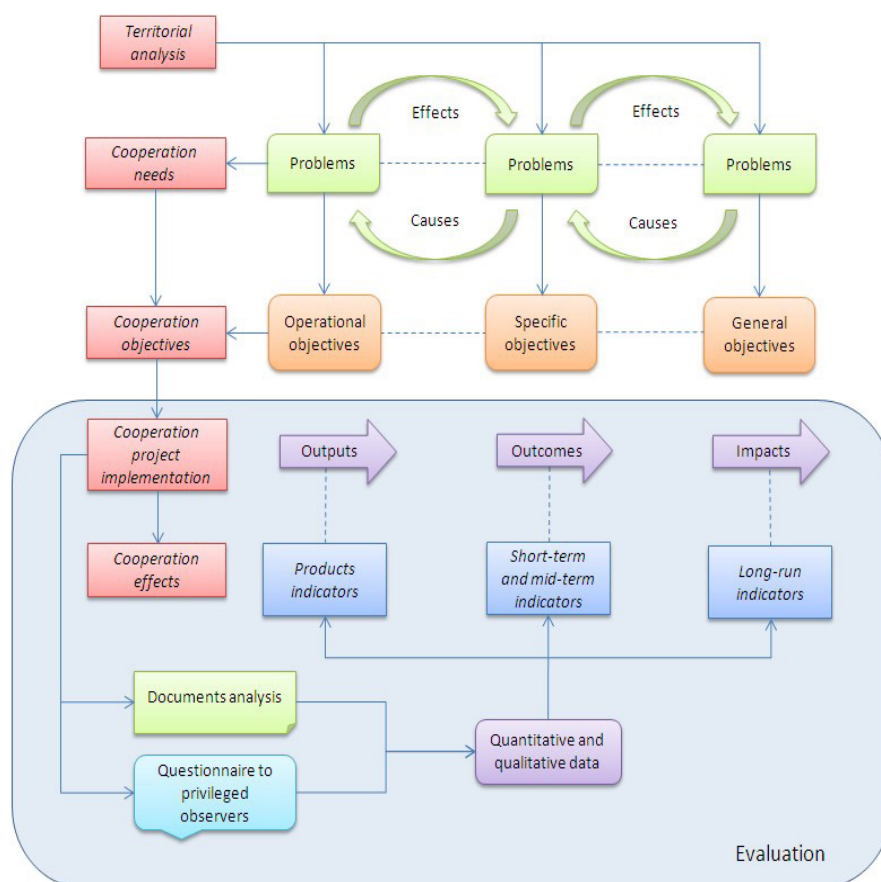


Fig. 2. Evaluation design framework

Source: Authors

Table 3. Objectives and expected results of the cooperation project

General objective	Specific Objectives	Operative objectives	Activities	Output	Outcome	Impact
Planning	Integrated planning, application of a bottom-up approach, adding value to local strategies.	Creation of an inter-territorial and transnational partnership. Cooperation between rural areas facing similar challenges. Stakeholders participation.	Identification of cooperation needs and expectation	1 Analysis	Cooperation needs identified.	Increased capabilities and social capital. Lessons learned. New strategies introduced. Enhanced capacity building and accountability.
			Involvement and participation of stakeholders Choice of priorities Research of partners	1 BoD assembly; 1 SEP consultation 7 Proposals sent	Local actors involved and participating; cooperation themes identified.	
			Comparison of needs and expectation Consolidation of the partnership	6 Meetings, in Italy and abroad; 1 plan of activities; 1 financial plan; 7 cooperation project files submitted to each MIA	Creation of an inter-territorial and transnational partnership; deepened knowledge of other rural areas and their strategies; shared ideas; Strategies approved and funded.	
			Planning of activities and financial dimension definition; Project submission			
Implementation	Enhancement of rural tourism and promotion of territories. Valorisation of environment and natural resources	Transfer and diffusion of methodologies for rural tourism development. Promoting LAGs' rural areas and tourism. Exchanging of know-how and best practices.	"Experience Centres": meetings, study visits, workshops addressed to local development actors	6 Meetings with study visits, in Italy and abroad; 1 international workshop	Local actors involved and participating. Exchanged experiences between development agents, LAG technicians and local actors.	Enhanced quality of rural tourism. Innovative practices introduced. Improved capacity building of local actors. Increased visibility of territories involved. Added value to forest products. Sustainable management of forestry.
			Creation of international centers for rural tourism promotion in each partners' area: "Rural Tourism Oasis"; Production of informatives; Realization of web pages about the project; Participation to an international tourism exhibition; Creation of a booking web site for rural tourism	2 Rural Tourism Oasis; 1 Brochure; 100 posters; 7 web pages; 1 Stand; 1 Web site	Restoration and habilitation of pre-existing structures for rural tourism activities. New rural tourists arrived at the areas involved; Information disseminated people reached; tourism agents met; Reservations made.	
			Network between local partnerships	1 Network (cooperation partnership)	New relationships between actors of different rural areas.	
			Creation of a Service Desk to offer assistance about: sustainable management of forests, introduction of systems for forests protection like PEFC and/or EMAS, creation and launch of typical forest foodstuffs (EEC Reg. n. 2081/92).	1 Service Desk	Local actors and forest entrepreneurs reached; consultancy given; certifications introduced, new forest foodstuffs launched.	
	Valorization and sustainable management of forest resources	Supporting local enterprises and disseminating good practices for a sustainable forestry; Deepening the knowledge about local resources and their potential; systematizing local resources.	Creation of a virtual warehouse to catalogue forest resources, and to promote and commercialize forest products; Feasibility study for possible local wood districts	1 Virtual warehouse; 1 Study	Forest resources catalogued; forest products commercialized; Deepened knowledge about characteristics of the areas useful for the creation of a district.	Sustainable management of forestry.
			Analytic studies about local resources, especially environmental ones like Sites of Community Importance (Dir. 92/43/EEC) and Special Protection Areas (79/409/EEC), accommodation capacity and historical and cultural heritage, in order to create a geo-referenced database and put them in a network	1 Multidisciplinary study; 1 geo-referenced database	Environmental and tourism resources catalogued and putted in network; qualitative and quantitative data available for users, tourists and researchers; people reached	

Source: Our elaboration from GAL Aspromar (2005) and internal LAG's documents (unpublished).

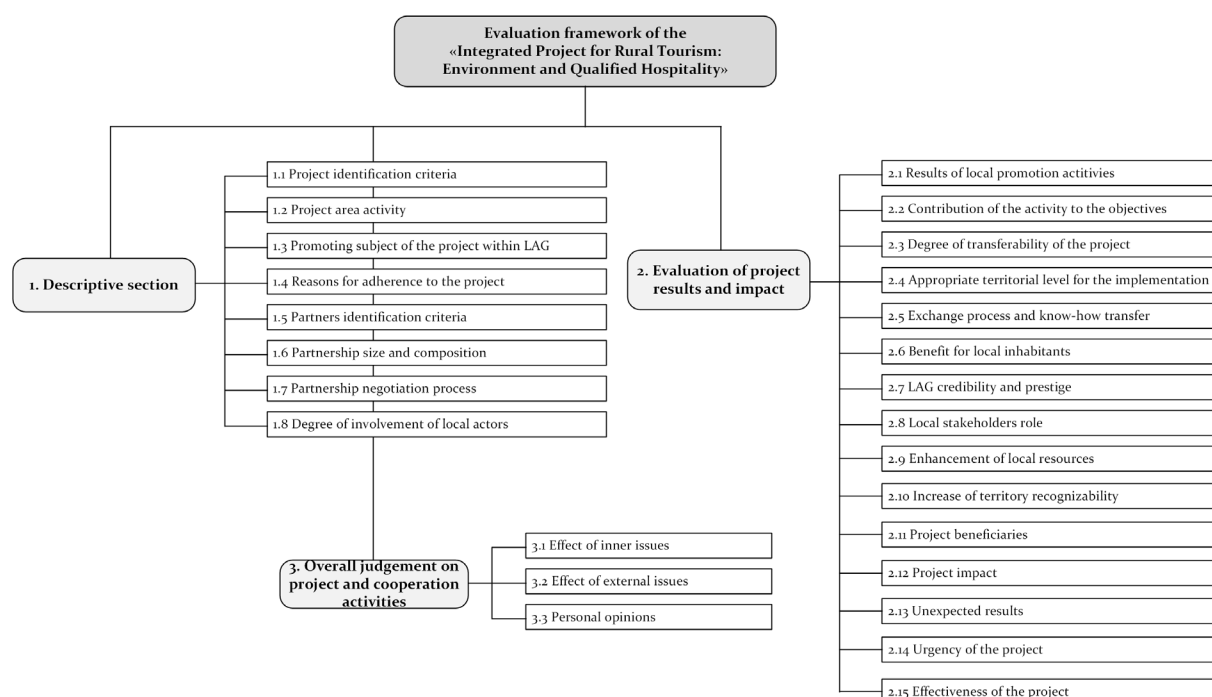


Fig. 3. Framework of evaluation survey
Source: Authors

section, (2) a section on the impact assessment, and (3) a section related to overall judgments on the project concerning its internal and external aspects, as well as reflections and suggestions to improve the main cooperation issues encountered in the project. By means of closed and open questions, it was possible to identify the best practices and critical elements of the project for each section. Related to the first section of the questionnaire, the evaluation design focused on the uniqueness of the project in terms of specific criteria used to identify its overall theme, the cooperation activities, the members of the partnership, the complexity of negotiation, and the degree of stakeholders' involvement in the project activities.

The second section aimed at evaluating results and impacts of the project and involved two main aspects: judgments on the achievements in terms of impact – on the territories and actors directly and/or indirectly involved – and the concrete implications of the project in terms of interventions realized.

With regard to the first aspect, the effects of animation activities were examined to understand how the groups of stakeholders benefited from the project, and what effects have been made available to

local actors in terms of efficacy, information retrieval, and practical knowledge, and in terms of the partners' contribution to exchanging and transferring experience and know-how. The second aspect considered in this part of the questionnaire aimed to assess how the implementation of specific activities contributed to achieving the general objectives of the project. In particular, it evaluated the links and coherence between specific objectives and operational activities in comparison to the extent and geographical area of the project's transferability, the possible increase in credibility and prestige of the LAG promoter and partners, the degree of local resource exploitation, and the presence of potential (positive or negative) effects unforeseen at the project's outset.

The last part of the section on the assessment of effects and results concerns the overall assessment of the project. It refers to a study carried out by the European Observatory LEADER (2001a, 2001b) and the Network National Rural Development (2007a). This is devoted to an appraisal of the impacts of the transnational cooperation project according to certain specific characteristics of LEADER (Fig. 4), but also to judgment on the influence of internal and outside issues on the extent of the project's reali-

zation. Specific LEADER features represent the elements crucial to the success of the program, and each of them is closely related to local development factors that vary according to the individual territories, namely the rural context, local players, and the institutional environment. These are the basic elements that make LEADER different from other programs supported by European Structural Funds (European Commission, 2002), it represent its added value, and determine its particular mode of action.

The evaluation methodology took into account the impact of the cooperation project with respect to specificity, breaking it down into indicators that explain the content. For example, the character of the ‘territorial approach’ was expressed through parameters regarding the involvement of local actors: that is, the level of achievement of awareness-raising about the importance of cooperation activities; the ability to gather suggestions; and the decision-making role of the parties involved. It proceeded in the same way for the other specificities, and respondents were asked to express an opinion on the intensity of the impact of each of the variables using a judgment scale ranging from 0 to 5 (De Luca et al., 2010, 2011).

The ‘bottom-up approach’ was investigated in relation to the project’s ability to recognize local needs, to exchange know-how and good practice between the LAGs, and to promote awareness of local populations in networking. The effects of the cooperation project on ‘local partnership’ understood in general as a ‘model of organization at the

local level that influences the institutional and political balance of the territory’ (Observatory LEADER European Observatory, 1996:6), were considered in relation to their ability to promote a more extensive local participation and a full integration of new members within the LAG.

The specificity of ‘integrated development’ was related to the effects of cooperation activities, namely the improvement of LAGs’ local strategy; the global impact on the area; the strength of linkages between tourism, local resources, territory, environment and rural life; and the promotion of sustainable use of local resources. The ‘innovation’ feature was divided into four parameters related to the possibility of establishing direct contacts to launch a debate on specific and novel thematics, to become aware of new approaches and strategies, and to learn new methods and activities. The ‘networking’ implemented in the project was evaluated in terms of the expansion and reinforcement of local networks; the follow-up of transnational network activities resulting from the project; and the integration of external partners to LEADER within the network.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Descriptive section

The survey conducted through the semi-structured questionnaire allowed the authors to build a gener-

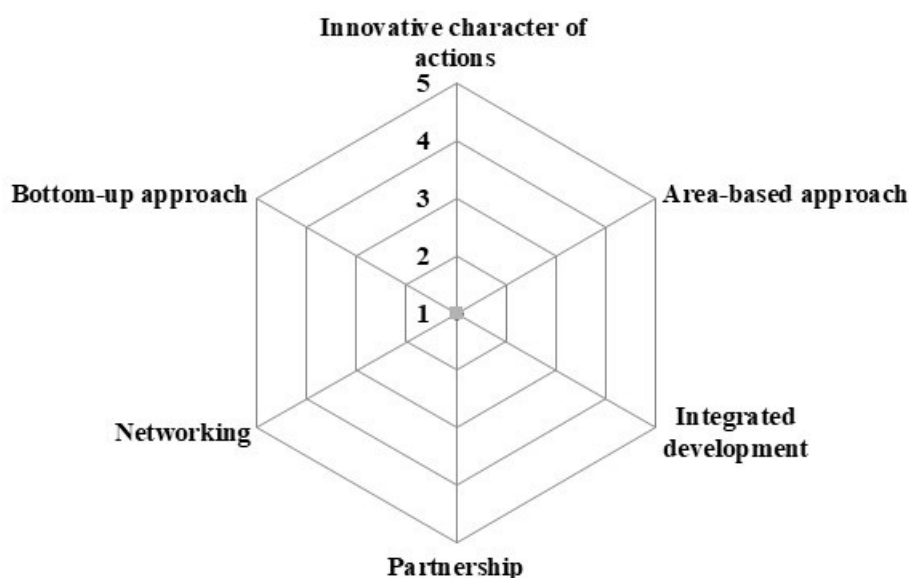


Fig. 4. Scores and attributes of the LEADER cooperation project
Source: Authors

al descriptive framework of the cooperation project, to evaluate impacts, and to collect overall judgments from those interviewed.

The first part of the questionnaire concerned the criteria used for the choice of cooperation themes; interviewees unanimously affirmed that rural tourism and sustainable forestry were already chosen during the planning phase of their local strategies and that they were chosen for their relevance to LDP themes. The main scope of the LAGs participation in the transnational partnership lay in obtaining synergies and multiplier effects to enhance the valorisation of local resources thanks to the involvement of other territories with similar characteristics (De Luca et al., 2010, 2011). The interviewees affirmed that the principal promoters of involvement in the cooperation project were the internal technicians, followed by the persons in charge of implementation, with average participation from SEP's local actors (grouped into three categories: politicians, technicians, and associations).

Concerning the criteria adopted to choose the cooperation partners (Fig. 5), results of the questionnaire confirmed that the analogy between rural areas' issues and cooperation themes was the main prerequisite upon which the transnational partnership was built.

Other factors that influenced the choice of partners were the complementarities of expertise concerning the main cooperation themes, and the pre-existing relationships among partners. Relative to the characteristics of transnational partnership, interviewees were asked how the dimension (number of partners) and the composition (typology of

partners) weighed on specific topics, such as the fulfilment of objectives, the increase of know-how, the valorisation of competences/differences, the implementation of activities, and the application of managerial solutions.

Answers were expressed in terms of positive or negative weight or no weight at all. Instead, in some cases interviewees affirmed that the qualitative and quantitative composition of the partnership favoured the good results of the project. In other cases, answers differed: some interviewees attributed a negative influence to both the dimension and the assortment of the partnership regarding topics like 'increase in know-how', 'valorisation of complementarities and/or differences', and 'implementation of activities'. An average positive judgment was expressed with reference to the 'application of managerial solutions'; indeed, interviewees affirmed that the restricted number of partners and their diversity allowed a good degree of functional integration and better project coordination. Concerning the functioning of the negotiation process of the partnership and the degree of involvement of local actors (Fig. 6) during all phases of the project, answers were very different: just one LAG assigned a high score, which corresponded to a judgment of excellent performance, to the functioning of the negotiation process. Likewise, interviewees were questioned about the degree of involvement of local actors during the project phases; the analysis and involvement of stakeholders, definition of general objectives and instruments, partner seeking, choice of interventions and financial dimensions, implementation, and evaluation of results received varied answers that mir-

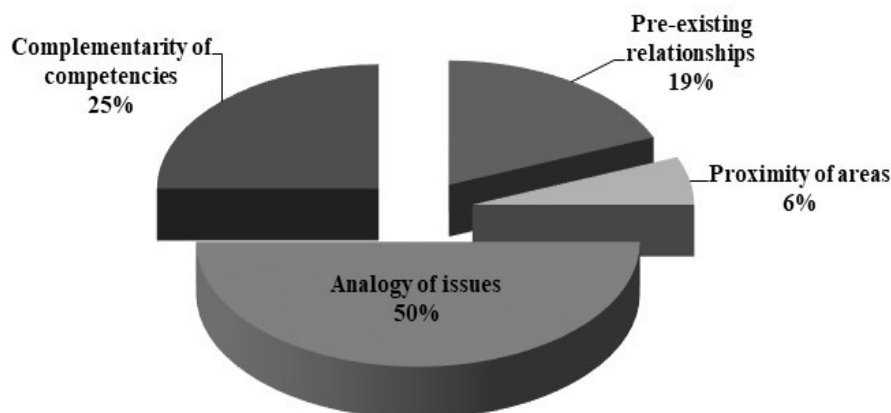


Fig. 5: Criteria adopted for the choice of partners
Source: Authors

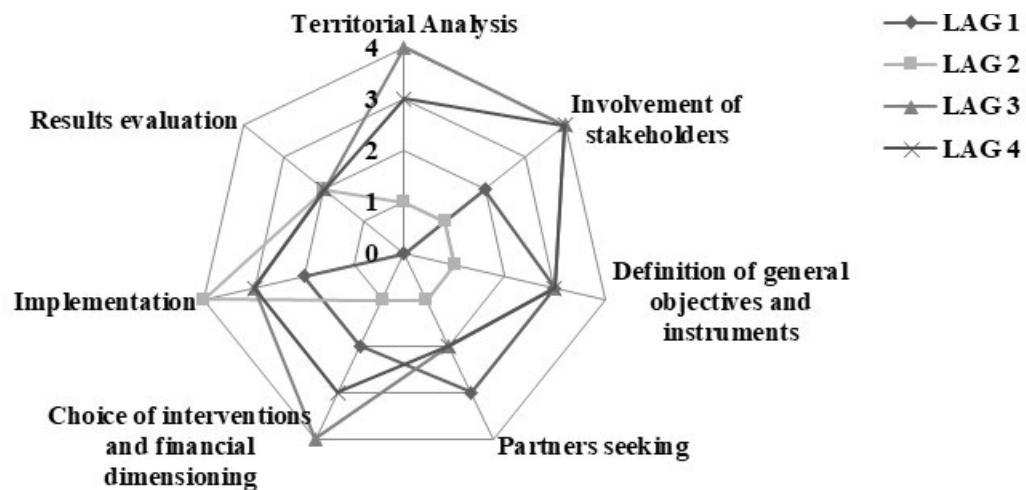


Fig. 6. Involvement degree of local actors in each project phase
Source: Authors

rored the differences in methodological approaches among the LAGs.

5.2 Evaluation of the project's impacts

A second part of the questionnaire concerned the evaluation of impacts of every single project phase on achievement of general objectives. Interview results showed that the phase of stakeholders' in-

volvement allowed suggestions to be collected that improved the planning; in other cases, it contributed to finding new local partners. The questionnaire also investigated how project activities contributed to the fulfilment of general cooperation objectives (Fig. 7).

LAG managers expressed a positive judgment on average; however, no one attributed the maximum score to the strong contribution of activities in fulfilling the general objective. Specifically, a very negative judgment was expressed concerning the

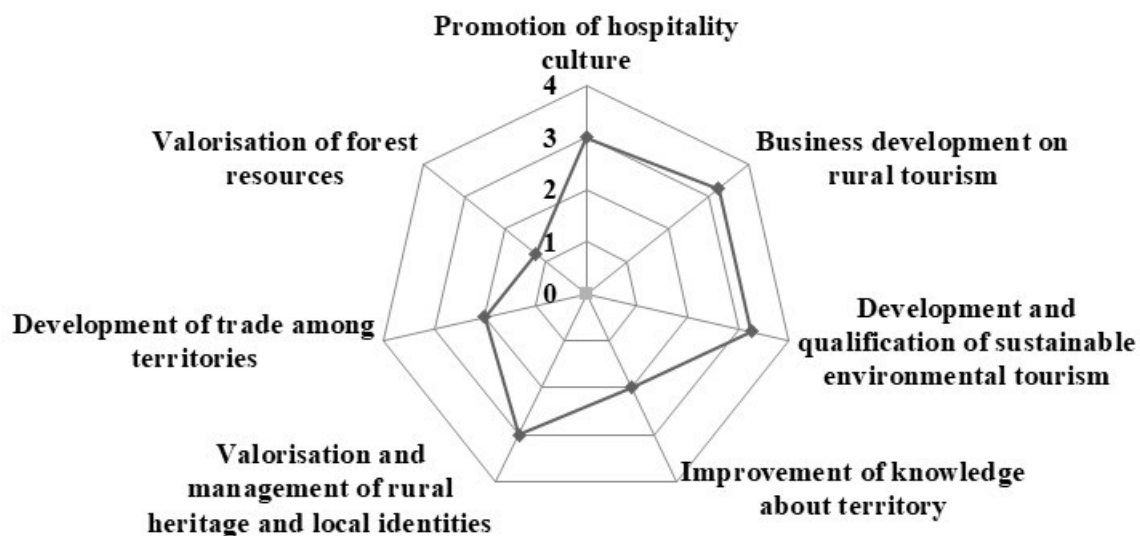


Fig. 7. Contribution of cooperation activities to the fulfilment of general objectives
Source: Authors

activities planned for the valorisation of forest resources, which did not contribute to the fulfilment of objectives.

The degree of transferability of the project was moderate to high (from the regional to the European level) because many municipalities and different fields of application could be involved, thanks to the planning and implementing methodology. In particular, results showed that the booking web site was a transferable best practice because of its effectiveness at integrating tourism entrepreneurs into a network.

Interviewees were asked if local actors, and the people in general, obtained information and know-how useful for their activities because of the project; answers were positive, and LAG managers added that the cooperation project allowed for ‘deepening specific topics’. In particular, as literally expressed by interviewed, ‘tourism operators acquired information and knowledge about the commercialization of tourism products and the opportunities offered by new information technologies’ and the project permitted ‘comparison[s] and exchange of knowledge between local and international operators’ (De Luca et al., 2010, 2011). Moreover, all interviewees agreed that the implementation of the project gave prestige and trust to the LAGs.

Concerning the role of the local actors involved and/or interested in the project, the survey showed that the role of decision-making concerned all local associations and private enterprises, in collabo-

ration with the LAGs’ technical staff. Local bodies, category associations, and syndicates had a role as informed subjects and, in some cases, a consultative role. The valorisation of local resources represented one of the main objectives for implementers to pursue. The survey distinguished the local resources in several typologies (local products, environmental resources, cultural heritage and landscape, traditions, human resources) and interviewees were asked what degree of valorisation was achieved through the project. Consistent with the main scope of the project – sustainable forestry and rural tourism – environmental resources, cultural heritage, and landscape represented the principal targets of valorisation, followed by human resources, local products, and unique local traditions (Fig. 8).

To overcome the inherent difficulties of impact assessment caused by their long-term nature and the great range of possible causes, the questionnaire asked LAG managers for their judgment on the effects generated by cooperation activities on their beneficiaries, including groups of stakeholders, and economic and institutional subjects (Fig. 9). Actors involved in tourism accommodation and businesses in general, are the categories that more than any others would have received positive feedback from the concretization of project activities concerning touristic promotion and networking in the tourism sector. Tourists also represented a significant group of beneficiaries for the activities aimed at tourism

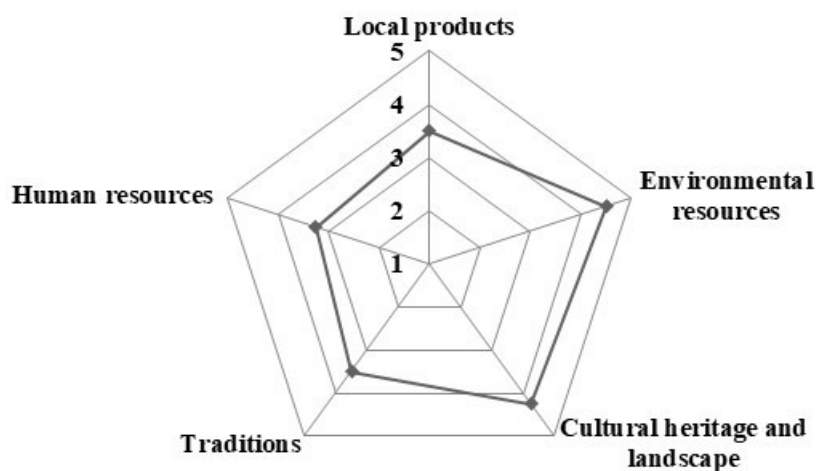


Fig. 8. Contribution of cooperation project to local resources valorisation

Source: Authors

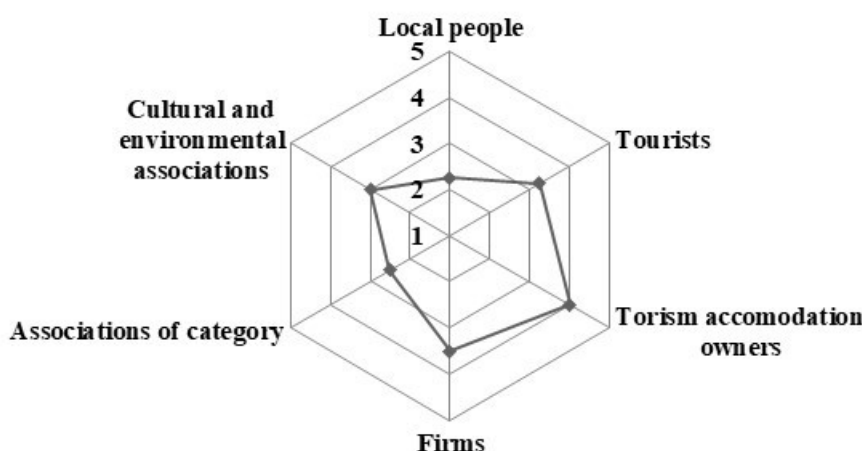


Fig. 9. Beneficiaries of the cooperation project
Source: Authors

valorisation (first objective) and, indirectly, the valorisation of forest resources (second objective).

The survey investigated unexpected positive effects of the project: responses noted that the same recipients - businesses and tourism operators - acquired more awareness and knowledge about quality standards on the tourism circuits. Concerning the evaluation of project effects on local development (Fig. 10) according to LEADER-specific features, the survey highlighted the fact that, on average, the strongest impact of the cooperation activities came from the degree of innovation in the typology of activities and contents concerning cooperation themes (De Luca et al., 2010, 2011).

Regarding the other main features of LEADER, the survey revealed only sufficient impacts. However, to the questions, 'Would the activities planned by the project have been realized without cooperation among other rural areas?' and 'Would results have had the same intensity?' interviewees answers were homogeneous, confirming the importance of cooperation as the only way to realize some specific activities in their territories.

Pursuant to the answers, indeed only 0.25% of the activities would have been realizable without the cooperation project. Specifically, the activity concerning the realization of transnational study visits and conventions - 'experience centres' among development agents - which was aimed at the ex-

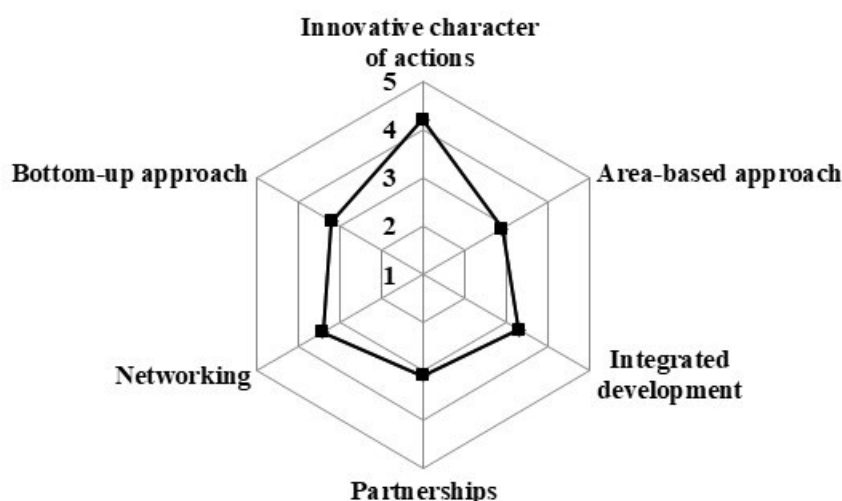


Fig. 10. Project impacts concerning the main features of LEADER.
Source: Authors

change of best practices and know-how, generated significant added value reinforced by the participation of local actors and operators. A foreign interviewee added that ‘to have good experience centres we need to have different know-how’. Motivations at the basis of the partnership, previous experiences, and the existence of a network were the most important requisites that allowed the realization of the brochure promoting rural tourism (the first objective of the project); it would not have been realized without the cooperation project.

5.3 Overall judgment on the project and the cooperation experience

A third part of the questionnaire inspected the main aspects that have had a positive or negative role in the implementation of transnational cooperation. As highlighted by (Zanetti, 2005:23), ‘despite the undeniable opportunities offered by cooperation experiences and the awareness about the added value coming from these activities to stimulate LAGs to form partnerships and cooperation projects, their enthusiasm is put through the wringer by several difficulties that characterize the implementation of these kind of projects’.

Questions have been formulated using negative and positive values as the scale of judgment; these range from -3 (very negative weight) to +3 (very positive weight). Internal aspects of the project have been analysed (partnership, contents of the project, management of project), as well as external ones (financial, juridical, and administrative aspects); interviewees were asked if these aspects had a positive weight in the implementation of the cooperation project (Fig. 11).

Concerning the partnership, the most positive aspects were attributed to the reciprocal trust among partners and to participation (involvement and expectations of partners), followed by communication capabilities, and the diversity of partners in terms of know-how and cultural differences. Thus, it is possible to deduce that the cooperation partnership gained advantages from diversity, considered as a resource, not as an obstacle. The numerical composition of partnership had a positive weight, while distances and logistics had no influence at all on activity implementation.

Relating project content, no aspects had a very positive weight (+3 score) on the realization of activities. The most positive weight was attributed to the definition of objectives, followed by activity planning, the partnership process management, the stimulation of interest regarding the coopera-

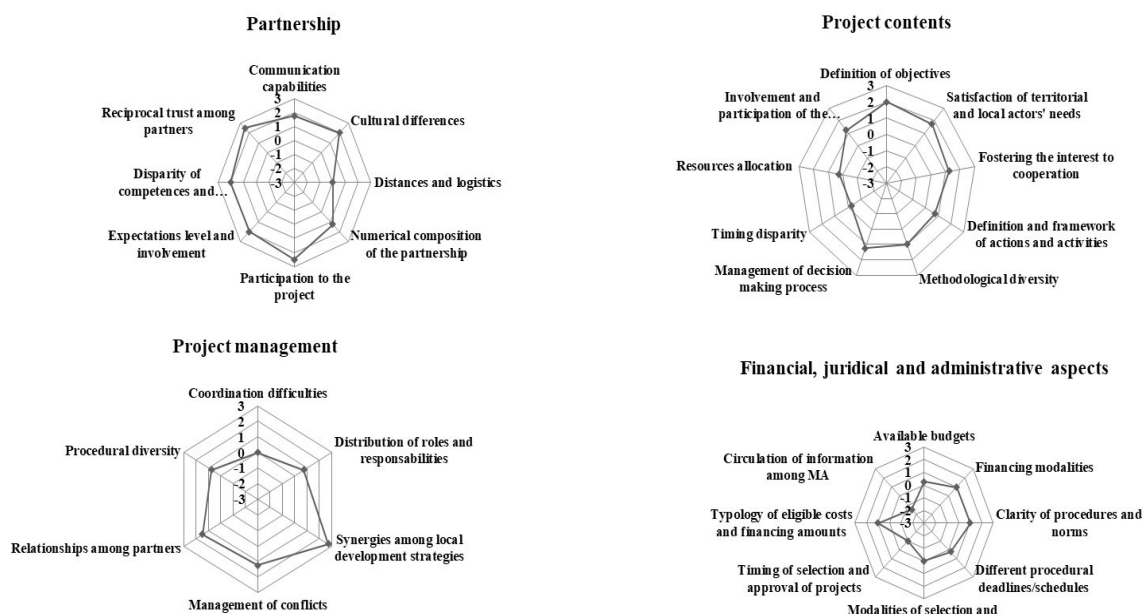


Fig. 11. Internal and external aspects affecting the cooperation project
Source: Authors

tion, and the involvement/participation of local actors (De Luca et al., 2010, 2011).

In terms of management of the project, the aspects most positively influencing the activities' realization were the synergies with the local development strategies of each partner, followed by relationships among partners; difficulties in coordination had a had a neutral score.

Regarding the external aspects of the project, or rather, the partnership contents of the project and its management, the strongest negative judgment was attributed to the circulation of information among Mas, and to the timing of selection and approval by the same actors. Moreover, a weakly positive weight (+1 score) was attributed by interviewees to the typologies of admissible costs and to the amount of financing, and likewise to the procedures of financing and the clarity of procedures and norms.

The last section of the third part of the questionnaire used to interview LAG managing directors was dedicated to their personal opinions on the entire cooperation project.

In light of their experiences, interviewees unanimously asserted that cooperation helped their marginal areas to overcome isolation, boosted resources, and forced the joint realization of activities that otherwise have been less effective and too expensive in terms of human and economic resources; moreover, they affirmed that cooperation allowed the partners to find new solutions to common issues.

Cooperation permitted an increase in the social capital of territories thanks to the creation of networks (involving different generations), and through the constant confrontation with different realities that, in turn, stimulated an improvement in capacity building. Interviewees confirmed the importance of putting network resources into the realization of the brochure and the booking web site: this was valuable capital that threatened to be lost if not used and reinforced over the long run (De Luca et al., 2010, 2011).

Concerning the management difficulties encountered by partners, interviewees attributed a negative weight to bureaucracy because of the slowness in approval by some MAs, the uncertainty of timing for implementation and, the lack of clarity about procedures in some cases.

LAG directors were asked what they would have changed or improved in future cooperation projects. Answers distinctly showed the necessity of territories meeting further cooperation needs as well as the urgency of partnerships strongly motivated and disposed to carry out continual cooperation in the long run were emphasized as the only way to capitalize on this kind of experience.

6. Conclusions

The first part of this study reviewed the main characteristics and purposes of inter-territorial and transnational cooperation under LEADER+, in terms of benefits, difficulties, and methodology. Three main kinds of benefits have been pointed out regarding economic and social aspects, and features of governance. All of them are widely recognized by local actors and development agents, especially the added value coming from the introduction of new solutions to common challenges, and from those activities that otherwise would have not been realizable because of a lack of capital owing to the limited dimensions of rural areas. Indeed, through cooperation it is possible to pool local resources, and extend and boost territorial strategies (Unité Nationale d'Animation LEADER+, 2007).

However, it is also an exigent initiative and to be successful it requires time, economic and human resources, and taking the risk of not achieving satisfactory results: LAGs have to face many challenges and difficulties, internal and external to the partnership, and these are sometimes not easy to control. Getting involved in a cooperation project is justified only if partners consider it worthwhile for their territories (Ray, 2001). As part of the life cycle of a project, evaluation is a necessary tool to provide evidence of successes and failures, verify the achievement of objectives, and identify potential improvements: it can help local actors address their strategies for the future. Nevertheless, evaluation has an accountability function (Zarinpoush, 2006). Issues of evaluation have been analysed that focus on its significance for local development and, in particular, on impact assessment concerning each specific feature of LEADER.

The aim of this paper has been to test an evaluation methodology to a LEADER+ case study, specifically, 'The Integrated Project for Rural Tourism: Environment and Qualified Hospitality', a transna-

tional cooperation experience led by the LAG Aspromar, based in Reggio Calabria (Southern Italy), whose main themes were rural tourism and the sustainable development of forestry. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected through the integration of three typical methods of social research (Bailey, 1994): a technique based on non-survey data (the documents study), and two techniques based on surveys, (i.e. interviews with privileged actors, and a semi-structured questionnaire).

In particular, the study of official and internal documents made available by the lead partner, allowed for the collection of quantitative data by measuring the efficacy and efficiency of outputs and outcomes, and therefore an assessment of whether short- and mid-term objectives were achieved. Privileged witnesses (LAG partner managers) were interviewed through a semi-structured questionnaire that allowed the authors to collect qualitative data and then identify impacts produced by the cooperation project on local development, particularly from the standpoint of LEADER-specific features.

Results enabled the authors to gather information, and evaluate the project and the partnership from the planning process to the implementation. Successes and failures have been highlighted in an attempt to trace the principal causes. Not all of the operational and specific objectives have been fulfilled, nor have all the expected outputs and outcomes been attained: their causes can be attributed to the disparities among partners, timing, and resource allocations, and likewise to procedural diversity, distances, and logistics. Concerning the process of project implementation, interviewees have asserted that the aspects that had the worst impact were the bureaucracy, the circulation of information among MA, and the differences in timing with regard to project selection and approval.

However, positive aspects have also been evident: cooperation permitted an increase in the social capital of the involved territories thanks to the creation of networks and through the constant confrontation with different realities. Sharing experiences and best practices (six 'experience centres') stimulated an improvement in capacity building and the transfer of know-how. Interviewees confirmed the importance of putting resources into the network: this involved valuable capital, but it threatens to be lost if not used and reinforced over the long run. Concerning

the specific features of LEADER, the best impacts of the project concerned innovation, followed by integrated development and networking. LAG managers had the possibility of expressing their reflections as well: in particular, they affirmed the necessity of the territories addressing further cooperation needs. Indeed, the necessity of suitable mechanisms for *metagovernance* (Jessop, 2002; Calabrò et al., 2009), in the form of strongly motivated partnerships disposed to cooperate continually in the long run, has been underlined as the only way to capitalize on this kind of experience.

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