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## EspañaTransnational Inter-Territorial Cooperation in the LEADER Approach. The Cases of Finland and Spain

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### KEYWORDS

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### INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVE

Neo-endogenous rural development has been widely implemented across the territories of the European Union thanks to the LEADER approach. This paper carries out an in-depth analysis of inter-territorial cooperation, focusing in particular on its transnational dimension. Managed by at least two Local Action Groups (LAGs) from two different member states, Transnational Cooperation Projects (TNCPs) are an essential part of this LEADER methodology. Despite their potential, the TNCPs have not lived up to expectations and have been underutilized, due to the bureaucratic and economic obstacles encountered. There have however been a number of very useful positive experiences. In order to assess this type of cooperation between different rural areas, an analysis of their experiences and illustrative case studies must be conducted with following main objective: to identify the main problems encountered in the implementation of these projects and the challenges that must be addressed to improve cooperation. A number of interesting and relevant reflections will also be presented. Finally, in addition to noting the main contributions of these projects, their “shadow effects” will also be assessed.

With this in mind, this paper studies the implementation of the TNCPs within the LEADER approach, analyzing the experiences of two EU member states, Finland and Spain. Finland is a revealing case when exam-



ining TNCPs because Finnish LAGs were among the most active in terms of involvement in and coordination of TNCPs within the EU-27 during the 2007-2013 programming period, leading a total of 69 TNCPs, or 1.2 per LAG, one of the highest rates in the EU. Spain, on the other hand, had one of the lowest levels of participation in TNCPs, with 0.1 per LAG.

## METHODOLOGY

Quantitative data were obtained from the evaluation reports of the European Rural Development Network (2014), while several different sources were used for the qualitative study. For information about the Spanish-led TNCPs, we consulted the reports by the National Rural Network of Spain (2013), while for Finnish TNCPs, our main source was the Nordic-Baltic LEADER Cooperation Award reports; in some cases, we also referred to the reports prepared by the coordinators of each LAG; another important source for Finnish projects was the report entitled "Local development and transnational cooperation" and its primary materials compiled in 2015 (Pylkkänen, P. et al. 2015); and finally, the data obtained from interviews conducted via a questionnaire sent to the managers, coordinators and technicians of TNCPs led by Finnish or Spanish LAGs. In the case of Finland, replies were received from 11 out of a total of 68 (16.2%), while for Spain the figure was 8 out of 17 (47.1%); combined responses for the two countries were therefore 19 out of 85 (22.4%). We were unable to obtain more responses to our questionnaire, largely because many years have passed since the application of these TNCPs, which means that, especially in the Finnish case, many of those responsible are now in different jobs and it has therefore been impossible to contact most of them. It should be made clear that these interviews were not intended to be statistically representative, and instead sought to obtain detailed qualitative information to shed light, firstly, on the problems of implementation of TNCPs, and secondly on their effects. Having said this, for the TNCPs in Spain, the sample size would be sufficient for a confidence level of 80% and a margin of error of 17%, and for the Finnish case, the sample would also be sufficient for an 80% confidence level, and a margin of error of 18%. We focused on the 2007-2013 programming period, because the projects for the 2014-2020 period are currently ongoing. With this in mind a brief questionnaire was prepared with closed and open questions about the perceived challenges, effects and lessons learned in the implementation of TNCPs. The main issues considered included: the number of TNCPs led by each country, the number of LAGs in each country, the TNCPs/LAGs ratio by country, the funding for TNCPs by country, institutional factors, detection of the main obstacles and bottlenecks, derived effects, experiences and case studies, the lessons learnt and possible alternatives for solving "bottlenecks".

## MAIN RESULTS

Our study revealed the modest implementation and uneven distribution of the TNCPs. There is a clear upward trend from the 6 experimental TNCPs implemented in the introductory phase (1991-1993), to the total of 462 in the last completed programming period, 2007-2013. Although there has been a substantial increase in the number of TNCPs, this must be contrasted with the much greater increase in the number of LAGs. During the programming period 2007-2013 only about 3 out of every 1000 projects implemented the transnational aspect of the LEADER approach. It is perhaps surprising that the countries in Central and Western Europe, which have been members of the EU since its inception, in no way dominate the map of transnational cooperation. We also found that the larger member states, such as Germany or France, which also have a significant number of LAGs, have a low level of implementation of TNCPs. Although English is the main language in transnational interaction and language skills and/or difficulties could explain some of the differences at LAG and country levels (ENRD, 2014), anglophone countries are not necessarily ahead of other non-English-speaking states in terms of cooperation projects. Interestingly, we found that the smaller, more recent Member States, with peripheral locations and less spoken languages were the most likely to participate in TNCPs during the 2007-2013 period. The first two in terms of the number of main partners in



TNCPs were Hungary (77) and Finland (69). In statistical terms, you are ten times more likely to find a transnationally active LAG in Finland than in Spain.

In order to understand why there are such large differences between countries, the particularities of each case (in this study Finland and Spain) must be examined. In Finland, the LEADER approach is a key vehicle in rural development policy, and its role is widely recognized and appreciated by a variety of key stakeholders. In this country, the LAGs in the 2000-2006 programming period were able to continue their operations without interruption until the beginning of the new 2007-2013 programming period, thanks to the funding provided by local councils (Hyyryläinen, T. et al., 2015). The potential benefits of transnational cooperation were detailed in the National Rural Development Programmes and in the specific support measures provided by the National Rural Network to facilitate transnational cooperation. LAGs could also decide on TNCPs independently within their own financial strategies and frameworks. For Spain, the institutional and social environment for LAGs deteriorated during this period (2007-2013). There was irregular support and recognition for transnational cooperation measures and the TNCPs were generally subject to evaluation and approval by the regional administration. In addition, Spain suffered a serious economic crisis during this programming period with severe consequences for all forms of funding of economic and social development.

Effects. Most of the positive effects of TNCPs are intangible and, in many cases, subjective. This explains why one of the main benefits cited was the establishment of “contacts and networks” between LAGs, different local actors, businesses and young people. Also frequently cited was the increase in the “experience, capacity, knowledge, skills and training” of local groups, institutions and inhabitants.

## CONCLUSIONS

Transnational cooperation has been implemented in a very limited and modest way. Instead of encouraging it, the governance and implementation mechanisms of TNCPs in LEADER have tended to discourage transnational cooperation and partly explain these low levels of implementation. The bureaucratic and procedural difficulties, the different times and norms, together with the apparent lack of interest in TNCPs on the part of regional and national administrations in Spain, contrasts with the priority given to and the facilities provided by the Finnish administration and their LAGs in the search for solutions to solve the following and other problems: the need for technicians to be specifically assigned to the TNCPs, better knowledge of languages, preliminary approval, funding for preparatory support, and greater project continuity.

Acting transnationally provides many types of learning and improves personal and institutional networks, to mention but a few of its advantages. All the qualitative evidence supports the positive potential of TNCPs for knowledge sharing, capacity development and strengthening of territorial strategies in terms of inspiration and new ideas. Cooperation and transnational connections can also foster solidarity.

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