

Competitiveness, Sustainability and Diversification on Atlantic Coast of Iberian Peninsula: Local Management of the European Fisheries Fund (2007-2013)

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This paper analyzes the application of the LEADER method in the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) during the 2007-2013 period in the fishing areas of the Atlantic coast of the Iberian Peninsula. The creation of Axis 4 of the European Fisheries Fund (EFF) marks a major transformation of this policy, developing a specific priority axis which incorporates the decentralized management in the sustainable development process of these spaces. The scope of the investigation brings together five regions case studies (including Portugal), with its Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs). From the analysis of each of the Local Development Strategies (LDS) different experiences emerge: some negative, from imbalances and lack of cohesion between projects and objectives, to excessive dependence with respect to the local authorities; and other positive, very meritorious and of impact, both in the fisheries sector and in the development of coastal communities.

With the 2006 reform of the EFF and the appearance of the Axis 4, the EU Member States were urged to define the areas of intervention of the policy (fishing areas) and to enable the constitution of the FLAGs. This meant adopting a more complex, plural and inclusive system of territorial governance at the local level, with the participation of the civil society (Community-Led Local Development, DLCC). Thus, the FLAGs would be from now responsible for the planning and implementation of development and investment strategies, an aspect that has enabled both the establishment of player systems, such as the integration of the key elements of development: the territory, the group and the strategy (Budzich-Tabor, U., 2014)

The CFP included the legacy of innovation of the rural development program LEADER by applying its approach based on the CLLD as a paradigm of socio-economic progress in

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outlying areas. It was the right practice to respond to the productive restructuring and economic crises, without forgetting that globalization questioned the meaning of place and value of the territorial identity, one of the key aspects of the socio-spatial configuration of the rural space (Woods, M., 2007). So, what was an alternative practice for the rural world, has now been transformed into a reference framework for the European public policies and territorial initiatives generating the rising participation dynamics.

The starting point of this research is focused on the delimitation of the intervention areas. On the Atlantic coast of the Iberian Peninsula (Northwestern Cantabrian and Bay of Biscay fishing grounds) there are fishing communities that maintain strong networks of cooperation and interregional, international interdependence around the Spanish-Portuguese border. There are, however, major differences in these communities with respect to the level of dependence regarding fishing or in the degree of integration and pulling of the sector in the rest of the economy and local and regional society.

In this context, the relationships established from the constitution of FLAG are of great interest. Member States have used different approaches to address this process, a few fully decentralized States have coexisted with others far away from the local scale. Thus, in Portugal coastal communities were encouraged to formalize nominations for both the constitution of the groups and the delimitation of fishing zones. In this case, some associations used their experience in local development to design the territory, bringing together local actors to become coherent FLAGs and plan strategies for integrated and sustainable development. On the contrary, in Spain the constitution of areas and selection of groups tasks were delegated to the Regions, which established a prior zoning to limit the participation of groups in the process.

Subsequently, the paper examines the strategies of local development designed in the planning phase, where the prior experience of the groups in the management of the territory has to be taken into special consideration. This essential matter also belongs to the study of the next phase, the implementation of the development strategy, where it should stand out from the FLAGs for both its ability to generate synergies with other local actors, and empowering inclusive initiatives.

In the peninsular Atlantic a total of 710 projects were financed in the 2007-2013 period with an investment of 45.2 M€. Out of these, 210 projects and 16 M€ correspond to Portugal, while in Spain the distribution of autonomous communities financed activities was 300 in Galicia, 117 in Asturias, 57 in the Atlantic Andalusia and 26 in Cantabria. This uneven implementation of Axis 4 is due, in principle, to the different importance of fishing activities and their associated industry at the regional level, but also to the ability of the FLAGs to realize activities objectives, and to mobilize and integrate local actors.



Theoretically, the implementation of Axis 4 transferred to the FLAGs the leading role in the distribution of EEF, as agents of local development. In practice, however, these structures were reduced, except successful exceptions, to the role of management entities to serve the interests of the administrations and local or regional authorities, who channeled de facto major investments.

Indeed, from the analysis of the financed projects, it appears that the FLAGs had many difficulties to integrate and streamline to entrepreneurs in the fisheries sector, mainly due to its isolation from the rest of the sectors present in the local and regional economies (Symes, D., et al., 2015). This problem also applies to the small local entrepreneurs, because it reflects the excessive influence that boast some of the partners in the local partnership, especially the local administration and big business. It is for this reason that the allocation of funds among local actors, in the majority of cases members of FLAG, was one of the usual practices present in the study area, which enabled them to gain access to a disproportionate share of grants.

Under these circumstances, projects led by fishermen and industry associations, although dissimilar depending on the zones, had a significant importance. They were relevant, to some extent, to avoid the excess of tourism development, especially in the more dynamic fishing areas, where fishing ran the risk of being considered more a heritage resource than an economic activity (Martindale, T., 2014).

The Axis 4 for the sustainable development of fisheries areas has intensified the debate about whether development strategies should strengthen the local economy of fishing base, or, on the contrary, stimulate the development of new economic sectors (Symes, D., 2005). This issue transcends the debate about whether these funds are more related to the regional policy of the EU and its convergence criteria, or to the objectives of the Common Fisheries Policy, driven by biological and economic imperatives rather than social imperatives (Symes, D., et al., 2009).

The FLAGs had to develop LDS in which integrate territorial development and sectoral development in a balanced way, in a bid to maintain social networks linked to the fishing activity (Morgan, R., et al., 2014). This situation allowed them to decide whether the strategies should encourage fishing initiatives, to support competitive and sustainable projects, or if they had to bet on the social and economic diversification in coastal communities. In most of the case studies both options are roughly complemented, especially in those actions in which, through diversification, they searched for the revitalization of the fisheries sector and the consideration of their cultural heritage, where fishermen would continue exploiting their knowledge and professional skills.

However, despite this willingness, and despite the analysis of the projects financed and executed by the FLAGs it is clear that it is lacking: (i) a overall strategic design, (ii) a distribution of funds to prioritize actions according to objectives, and (iii) an assessment



of the synergies that would improve the capacity of these fishing areas in its sustainable development. These statements are held in a diagnosis that casts more shadows on the role of FLAGs. In the first place, due to the fact that local authorities are using a significant part of the funds allocated to the tourism development on other economic sectors, but also to finance actions and social equipment (more appropriate to be funded by other means); this control of local authorities also favors dependency and patronage cases. And, secondly, due to the hard-to-justify financing of these and other actions, due to its poor relevance and benefits in the CLLD framework.

In short, we have witnessed a situation in which the resource has created the project, when it would have been expected that the project facilitated the resource (Vachon, 2001). It is imperative that the documents relating to the management of the Axis 4 in 2014-2020 would include recommendations to the FLAGs in order for strategies to be driven by local needs, and do not turn into wish lists in accordance with the prevailing financial provisions (European Commission, 2015b).

