

Article

Not peer-reviewed version

---

# LEADER Territorial Cooperation in Rural Development: Added Value, Learning Dynamics, and Policy Impacts

---

[Giuseppe Gargano](#) \* and [Annalisa Del Prete](#)

Posted Date: 14 May 2025

doi: 10.20944/preprints202505.1013.v1

Keywords: rural development; LEADER approach; territorial cooperation projects; added value



Preprints.org is a free multidisciplinary platform providing preprint service that is dedicated to making early versions of research outputs permanently available and citable. Preprints posted at Preprints.org appear in Web of Science, Crossref, Google Scholar, Scilit, Europe PMC.

Copyright: This open access article is published under a Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 license, which permit the free download, distribution, and reuse, provided that the author and preprint are cited in any reuse.

*Article*

# LEADER Territorial Cooperation in Rural Development: Added Value, Learning Dynamics, and Policy Impacts

Giuseppe Gargano\* Annalisa Del Prete

Council for Agricultural Research and Economics, Research Centre for Agricultural Policies and Bio-Economy,  
Italy

\* Correspondence: giuseppe.gargano@crea.gov.it

**Abstract:** This study examines the added value of territorial cooperation within the LEADER approach, a key pillar of the EU's rural development policy. Both interterritorial and transnational cooperation projects empower Local Action Groups (LAGs) to tackle common challenges through innovative, community-driven strategies. Drawing on over 3,000 projects since 1994, LEADER cooperation has proven its ability to deliver tangible results—such as joint publications, pilot projects, and shared digital platforms—alongside intangible benefits like knowledge exchange, improved governance, and stronger social capital. By facilitating experiential learning and inter-organizational collaboration, cooperation enables stakeholders to work across territorial boundaries and build networks that respond to both national and transnational development issues. The interaction among diverse actors often fosters innovative responses to local and regional problems. Using a mixed-methods approach, including case studies of Italian LAGs, the research analyzes the dynamics, challenges, and impacts of cooperation, with a focus on learning processes, capacity building, and long-term sustainability. Therefore, the study focuses not only on project outcomes but also on the processes and learning dynamics that generate added value through cooperation. The findings highlight how cooperation promotes inclusivity, fosters cross-border dialogue, and supports the development of context-specific solutions, ultimately enhancing rural resilience and innovation. In conclusion, LEADER cooperation contributes to a more effective, participatory, and sustainable model of rural development, offering valuable insights for the broader EU cohesion policy.

**Keywords:** rural development; LEADER approach; territorial cooperation projects; added value

## 1. Introduction

This article aims to deepen the understanding and theoretical framing of territorial cooperation among Local Action Groups (LAGs) within the LEADER approach, as part of the broader framework of European rural development policy implementation.

It explores the various forms of cooperation that have emerged and highlights the distinctive role that interterritorial and transnational collaboration plays in facilitating organizational and policy learning. The LEADER approach, as part of the EU's rural development policy, promotes bottom-up, community-led local development (CLLD) through the active participation of local stakeholders. Among its core instruments, cooperation projects represent a fundamental component in achieving the objectives of LAGs development strategies since they stand out for their capacity to foster innovation, exchange of knowledge, and inter-territorial solidarity. While they address territorial needs similarly to local initiatives, they also introduce innovative modalities for tackling shared challenges through collaborative and creative solutions. Cooperation across rural areas is expected to more effectively address strategic development challenges by fostering shared solutions at broader geographical scales—solutions that would be less effective or feasible without collaborative efforts. Through these processes, actors develop competencies to operate within novel governance structures

and at different scales, drawing on external experiences to address localized or regional challenges [1].

Since the early programming cycles of the LEADER initiative—from LEADER II (1994–1999), through LEADER+ (2000–2006), the LEADER Axis of Rural Development Programmes (2007–2013), to Measure 19.3 in the 2014–2020 programming period—cooperation has become an increasingly integral part of EU rural development policy [2].

Over 3,000 cooperation projects have been implemented, contributing significantly to fostering innovation, knowledge transfer, and sustainable development across rural Europe by generating both tangible outcomes (e.g., pilot projects, joint publications, shared digital platforms) and intangible effects (e.g., enhanced governance capacities, social capital development, and long-term learning). These initiatives have also strengthened territorial cooperation and mutual learning among rural communities. Examples of joint actions include the co-development of capacity-building activities for LAGs and stakeholders, the production of shared knowledge tools, the adoption of common methodologies, and the drafting of integrated development plans. Additional areas of cooperation encompass rural tourism, landscape management, local supply chain innovation, the valorization of cultural and natural heritage, social inclusion, and improved access to essential services. Such cooperation fosters mutual enrichment through knowledge exchange, enabling actors to share best practices, strategies, and resources. LAGs are encouraged to establish partnerships not only with others within the same Member State but also transnationally, including third countries with similar rural development frameworks. These collaborations enhance the scope for innovation and sustainability beyond national boundaries. Projects may be either interterritorial—between regions within a single country—or transnational—between regions in different Member States. In both cases, they are grounded in local development priorities and reinforce local strategies by aggregating critical mass, pooling resources, and exploiting complementarities. This synergy supports economic objectives such as product promotion, process innovation, and market expansion, while also fostering community engagement and identity [3].

The transnational dimension, in particular, often broadens strategic perspectives and facilitates the internationalization of local enterprises. Moreover, these initiatives yield significant soft outcomes. By exposing participants to different cultural and institutional contexts, cooperation projects promote intercultural understanding and a stronger sense of European citizenship. They also enhance local visibility of EU policies and contribute to capacity building by developing methodological, technical, and linguistic competencies.

Although the LEADER approach has received considerable scholarly attention within rural development policy, the specific phenomenon of territorial cooperation has been relatively overlooked—despite its significant expansion, involving thousands of stakeholders and fostering enhanced knowledge sharing through national and European rural networks

Existing research has shown that territorial cooperation improves participants' awareness of policy concepts and fosters a sense of shared European identity [4-5]. However, the extent to which this awareness translates into organizational or policy change remains uncertain. Investigating the link between individual learning and broader institutional shifts is therefore essential to understanding cooperation's impact.

As noted by Dabinett [6] (p. 289), territorial cooperation represents a model of cooperative learning that warrants further exploration in relation to policy development, institutional learning, and communicative planning. Previous studies indicate that cooperation initiatives have fostered new spatial planning practices and the transregional dissemination of key concepts [7-8-9-10-6]. Theoretical approaches from social and organizational learning, as well as innovation sociology, provide useful tools for this purpose [11-12-13]. Halpern [14] (pp. 697-713) emphasizes how innovations introduced through cooperation may reshape local routines and institutional structures. This can occur either through exposure to 'good practices' from other regions or by reconceptualizing problems at broader territorial scales.

Actors may consciously adapt practices from elsewhere to drive institutional reform [15] (pp. 19-32). Cooperation thus serves as both a learning and transformative mechanism. Hall's [11] theory of social learning highlights the role of ideas in shaping policy, reflecting recent trends in European spatial planning research that focus on the construction and institutionalization of concepts across governance levels [16,17].

Furthermore, few studies have proposed concrete methodological frameworks to empirically examine this phenomenon. Existing assessments often prioritize economic metrics such as GDP growth, productivity, and spending efficiency, largely neglecting the qualitative dimensions of development [18-19].

Nevertheless, systematic methodologies to assess the real impacts of these cooperative efforts remain underdeveloped—partly due to the inherent difficulty in evaluating their influence on domestic planning systems and their broader 'added value' [20-21].

To date, assessments of LEADER cooperation have typically borrowed evaluation tools from the Structural Funds framework, which emphasizes indicators, measurable objectives, and benchmark-driven reporting at key stages—ex-ante, mid-term, and ex-post. These evaluations prioritize financial oversight and compliance, focusing largely on budgetary absorption. Projects are required to report quantitative 'output', 'result', and 'impact' indicators, making indicator-based approaches dominant [3].

Such quantitative methods fall short in capturing the nuances of LEADER cooperation, which often produces intangible outcomes such as knowledge exchange and institutional learning [5].

This positivist framework primarily serves accountability purposes, emphasizing efficiency and cost-effectiveness to justify spending at the EU and member state levels. Alternative approaches—such as realist evaluation (context-sensitive analysis), constructivist paradigms (emphasizing co-created meanings), and formative assessment (geared toward implementation improvement)—offer promising avenues [22] (pp. 179-188).

Critiques of EU Cohesion Policy evaluations underscore three main concerns. First, traditional assessments overlook governance and institutional impacts that extend beyond socio-economic results [23]. Scholars have begun to address these gaps by analyzing how Structural Funds shape local governance, institutional capacities, and innovation [24], yet few have examined the institutional effects of territorial cooperation itself [14]. Second, the evolving nature of EU-funded operations—particularly the shift toward regional innovation, networks, and clusters—demands more responsive evaluation models [25] (pp. 143-156), [26]. Traditional models lack the flexibility to assess learning processes or capture the diffusion of best practices. Evaluating these processes requires more interactive and process-oriented methods [23] (p.1). Third, the absence of systematic ex-post evaluation of LEADER cooperation projects hinders institutional learning from past initiatives [5]. Consequently, evaluation scholars advocate for methodologies that incorporate constructivist and formative dimensions [22] (pp. 179-188). This aligns with broader shifts in evaluation theory, which increasingly emphasize discourse, reflexivity, and stakeholder engagement [27] (pp. 193-211). Consequently, researchers must focus their analysis on the processes and outcomes of territorial cooperation, specifically the learning dynamics involved and their implications or their lack. In response to these findings, the European Commission has issued new guidelines emphasizing qualitative methods such as interviews and case studies to assess cooperation more effectively [3]. The aim of these guidelines is to provide the background and rationale for assessing LEADER added value and then to set out a model of an evaluation framework on how to do it in practice.

Therefore, drawing on emerging perspectives on horizontal Europeanization and evolving evaluation paradigms, this article proposes a new analytical framework to assess learning and cooperation outcomes in territorial projects. Based on the authors' applied experience supporting LAGs within the National Rural Network of Italy, two central claims are made. First, conventional policy transfer models inadequately reflect the distinct dynamics of learning and cooperation found in LEADER projects, although existing literature on cognitive Europeanization offers a promising



alternative. Second, current evaluation tools are insufficient for assessing learning processes or institutional changes in this context.

This study seeks to contribute to the literature on rural development by analyzing the concrete results of LEADER cooperation, drawing from the direct experiences of involved stakeholders. Through a methodological framework integrating both quantitative and qualitative tools, and based on four selected case studies, the research explores the dynamics, impacts, and sustainability of cooperation practices beyond the lifecycle of individual projects identifying their added value and the mechanisms through which they contribute to long-term structural improvements in rural areas [28].

## 2. Objectives and research questions

The primary aim of this research is to analyze and conceptualize territorial cooperation within the LEADER framework and to assess its comparative effectiveness relative to other modalities of EU rural development. Specifically, the study investigates how cooperation initiatives address strategic rural development challenges that remain unmet or less effectively tackled by non-cooperative interventions. The article is structured around two main inquiries. First, how can evaluation methodologies be adapted to better capture learning processes? Second, how can the conceptual study of territorial cooperation be reframed to place learning at the core of impact assessments and notions of added value?

To address these questions, the article introduces a conceptual and empirical framework for evaluating learning and cooperation in interterritorial and transnational contexts. By analyzing learning mechanisms more deeply, this article questions whether cooperation is simply instrumentalized for competitive advantage [29] (211-224) or whether it enables more cohesive, solidaristic forms of territorial governance. This contribution is situated within academic debates on horizontal Europeanization and rural development, but it also has broader relevance for other EU Territorial Cooperation Objectives, including Horizon Europe and other Cohesion Policy initiatives [30] (pp. 1518-1529). This study thus aims to contribute to the development of a refined evaluation framework that better captures the complexity of LEADER cooperation. Three analytical dimensions are prioritized: (1) the degree and intensity of cooperation among involved actors, (2) the nature of learning processes activated through cooperation, and (3) the extent to which these processes influence institutional behavior and policy change.

The findings are expected to inform both the academic debate on Europeanization mechanisms in rural development and policy discussions concerning the design and evaluation of EU territorial cooperation programmes. The research also examines project implementation and governance, comparing planned objectives with actual results, and assessing the effectiveness of institutional arrangements.

## 3. The Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative analysis with qualitative insights to provide a comprehensive evaluation of LEADER cooperation projects. A comprehensive project assessment should indeed consider the implementation process, its effectiveness, achievements, and shortcomings. An integrated methodology combining quantitative data and qualitative tools enhances the analysis. While quantitative data can identify trends, qualitative tools uncover deeper understanding of the processes, motivations, challenges and contextual factors underlying project implementation, and unintended outcomes. In this design, qualitative tools guide the process, with quantitative data serving a complementary role. Yet, diverse motivations among partners can complicate assessments. Not all stakeholders may prioritize learning—some may be more interested in funding or policy influence [29 - 28 -31]. Thus, understanding these motivations is key to evaluating cooperation outcomes.

Establishing the rationale for cooperation is critical, as it shapes both the nature and extent of learning within a partnership. Following the framework proposed by Lähteenmäki-Smith and Dubois [5], two variables are particularly relevant in explaining cooperation intensity and outcomes: (1) the thematic scope of the projects and (2) the geographical and institutional diversity of the partners involved. Researchers can investigate these variables by analyzing project documents, motivations of participating stakeholders, and direct observations.

The evaluation process will analyze policy documents, cooperation factors, and territorial relevance using a theory-driven approach with key evaluation questions. Data sources include digital and physical records, project documents, and partner reports. Insights from these sources will inform semi-structured interviews and surveys with local stakeholders to explore their perceptions and experiences.

Document analysis will be conducted on project applications and implementation records, focusing on the objectives, expected outputs, and declared motivations of partners. Particular attention will be paid to the roles played by different actors and the types of resources mobilized. Given the diversity of interests involved—ranging from accessing funding to adapting EU policies to specific national or regional contexts—the research will consider both instrumental and normative drivers of participation [29-31-32].

Semi-structured interviews with LAG representatives and other stakeholders will complement the documentary review, exploring their perspectives on the value, challenges, and learning outcomes of cooperation. These interviews will also gather information on governance structures, internal coordination mechanisms, and perceived impacts at both organizational and territorial levels.

Evaluation questions will be structured around key themes identified in the literature and complemented by follow-up questions to address specific case contexts. Respondents will be invited to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the current cooperation framework, as well as to propose improvements for future programming periods. Interviewees will be asked about their understanding of cooperation, perceived project impacts, and suggestions for improvement. Ethical safeguards will ensure anonymity and voluntary participation.

The findings will be cross-validated using triangulation methods, giving priority to qualitative data, with quantitative elements included where available to enhance reliability and internal validity. Qualitative content analysis will play a central role in interpreting interview and documentary data, while quantitative indicators will be used to validate patterns and trends where applicable. The analysis will also consider the sustainability of cooperation outcomes, including exit strategies and the institutionalization of new practices. The ultimate aim is to provide actionable recommendations to improve the design, management, and evaluation of future LEADER cooperation initiatives, with specific focus on governance, inter-institutional coordination, stakeholder engagement, and financial sustainability. These recommendations aim to inform future project design, improve coordination and governance, and ensure sustainability through better exit strategies and knowledge-sharing mechanisms.

#### 4. The Case studies

In the initial phase of the study, the dataset from “Progetto ReteL.E.A.D.E.R.” (L.E.A.D.E.R. Network project) was used. The Project, funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and developed under the Italian National Rural Network Programme 2014–2020, was designed to provide a platform for building and sharing knowledge about LAGs, local development strategies, and cooperation projects. The cooperation section offers data on the implementation of sub-measure 19.3, “Preparation and implementation of LEADER cooperation activities” within the EU Rural Development Programmes 2014-2020. It includes information on the cooperating LAGs, intervention themes, types of approved cooperation projects, total committed resources, and the number of funded projects. It also indicates where to access procedural documents and fact sheets for the approved cooperation projects.

The selected case studies represent a meaningful sample of the diverse types of LEADER cooperation projects implemented by the Italian LAGs. Since territorial context influences both the thematic focus and the expected added value of cooperation, the analysis examines two interterritorial cooperation projects—limited to Italian regions—and two transnational projects involving partners from multiple EU Member States, in addition to Italy.

**Table 1.** - Classification of Case Studies.

Project title	Typology	Topic	Added value	Geographic area	Lead LAG
Rural Horizons	Interterritorial	Rural tourism	Strengthening the territory and local partnerships	Northern Italy	Risorsa Lomellina
Memories and the Web: Telling the Story of Our Territories.	Transnational	Social inclusion	Strengthening territorial identity and enhancing the significance of local heritage	Southern Italy, Spain	Sulcis Iglesiente
Landscapes to live	Interterritorial	Valorization of Natural Heritage	Making projects more ambitious by achieving critical mass	Central Italy	Valli Marecchia e Conca
Rediscovered Garden	Transnational	Biodiversity Restoration	Enhancing local responses to global challenges (e.g., climate change, migration, etc.).	Northern Italy, Austria	Alto Bellunese

The lead LAGs of each project (Risorsa Lomellina, Sulcis Iglesiente, Valli Marecchia e Conca, Alto Bellunese) were contacted to confirm their interest in participating in the study. Once their participation was confirmed, a questionnaire was sent to them, with a request to distribute it to the other project partners as well.

The questionnaire consisted of 62 questions, divided into six sections, each focusing on one of the following topics:

- Diagnosis of Cooperation
- Project Implementation
- Lessons Learned
- Project Impact
- Project Results
- Sustainability

The majority of the questions (56) were open-ended. Additionally, each section concluded with a final question that allowed the LAGs to provide an overall evaluation of the specific aspect being analyzed. In total, 16 out of 17 questionnaires were completed and returned.

*4.1. The Case Study of the project "Rural Horizons" – A Cooperation Project to Strengthen and Reconnect the Historical and Cultural Link Between the City and Its Surrounding Countryside.*

The "Rural Horizon" project is an interterritorial cooperation initiative implemented between 2019 and 2022. Originally conceived as a transnational project, it underwent modifications due to delays in meeting procedural requirements, which led some foreign partners to independently begin their activities. As a result, with a financial allocation of just under 408,000 euros, the project was reorganized into an interterritorial typology, involving four Italian LAGs: Risorsa Lomellina, as the lead LAG, along with Lago di Como, Terre del Po, and Carso. The project involves two Italian regions: Lombardy and Friuli Venezia Giulia. These territories, while differing in altitude, natural resources, and economy, share one key element: proximity to large, densely populated urban areas and renowned tourist destinations, such as Milan, Como, Mantua, and Trieste [33].

Risorsa Lomellina is located in Lomellina, a broad plain in the province of Pavia, approximately 70 km from Milan. This area is characterized by intensive and specialized agriculture, spread across 41 municipalities. In a 12 sq. km region, dominated by small villages and large farmhouses, only 1.6% falls within national or regional parks. The area's history is closely linked to human intervention: for over a millennium, local communities have shaped the landscape, leveling sandy and gravel hills formed by flooding from the Sesia, Ticino, and Po rivers, and creating a network of canals and ditches for irrigation [34].

Not far from Milan, the territory of the LAG Lago di Como extends between the Triangolo Lariano and the Valle d'Intelvi, two mountainous areas overlooking the lake. This region includes 59 municipalities, covering a total area of 478.99 sq. km, out of which 51 are classified as rural areas with development issues and 8 as intermediate rural areas. A significant aspect is that 55 of the municipalities fall under the "Inner Areas" Italian National strategy, meaning they are distant from essential services like education, healthcare, and transportation. While agriculture employs only a small portion of the population (around 2%), tourism plays a crucial role in the local economy [35].

The territory of the LAG Terre del Po extends between Oglio Po and Oltrepò Mantovano, just a few kilometers from Mantua and Cremona. It includes 21 municipalities, out of which 13 in Oltrepò Mantovano and 8 in the Oglio Po area. This region represents the 'agricultural heart' of Lombardy, with a high number of farms, which account for 25.83% of economic activities—more than sectors like commerce (20.97%). The landscape is strongly influenced by the presence of the Oglio, Po, Secchia, and Mincio rivers, which also define the economic identity of the region. Despite its marked rural vocation, the area is undergoing a gradual urbanization process [36].

The LAG Carso territory stretches along the narrow strip of land between the Adriatic Sea and the Italian-Slovenian border, including 12 municipalities in the provinces of Trieste and Gorizia. It is primarily hilly and consists of a mix of intermediate rural areas (6 municipalities), areas with intensive agriculture (5 municipalities), and urban and peri-urban areas (1 municipality). While agriculture is not dominant, there is a growing interest in activities like hiking, cycling, and ecotourism, particularly among the younger population. Additionally, the Carso region is home to the Area Science Park, the largest National Technology Park, which includes two campuses and laboratories collaborating with industry and 88 high-tech SMEs [37].

The motivations driving the LAGs to undertake the cooperation project stem from the socio-economic needs of the territories and their potential for sustainable development. The main objectives are to promote local economic resilience by valorizing endogenous resources; to encourage sustainable tourism, creating new opportunities for the sector; to improve the socio-environmental well-being of local communities; and to strengthen the connection between rural areas and large cities, overcoming the gap between two seemingly close but fundamentally different realities. Large cities have become increasingly impersonal, and for many inhabitants—especially the youth—rediscovering a sense of belonging is a challenge. Reconnecting the countryside with urban life means rebuilding ties to the food supply chain and the cultural roots of communities. Furthermore, integrating the countryside into urban daily life brings economic benefits through access to natural resources and reciprocal proximity services. In light of these objectives, the project aims to develop tourism in rural areas close to urban centers, raising public awareness through a promotional campaign and enhancing connections between cities and the countryside. Key initiatives include intelligent and sustainable mobility solutions (e.g., bike/car sharing, electric vehicles, and charging stations); improving accessibility to rural areas by promoting tourist and nature trails; and valorizing local excellence through food and wine experiences and activities related to cultural and historical heritage. The ultimate goals are to stimulate the development of rural areas, support the local economy, strengthen territorial identity, and promote a sense of mutual belonging between the city and its surrounding territory [33].

#### 4.1.1. Project Activities



To address the challenges and seize the specific opportunities of each territory, a series of activities were carried out that had a measurable impact on both the local economies and the social fabric of the involved communities.

The LAGs adopted a common strategy, engaging a wide range of public and private entities. This approach aimed to strengthen the sense of belonging among the local population and to make them active participants in the development of the territory. A coordinated promotional campaign highlighted the unique features of each area, initiating a pilot event to assess the effectiveness of communication strategies and engagement tools. Subsequently, informational and communication activities were carried out across all regions, including the creation of promotional materials, local networking workshops, and digital content such as websites and promotional videos, aimed at raising awareness and enhancing local expertise. A feasibility study analyzed the potential expansion of mobility networks typically found in urban areas. The study examined the best implementation strategies, associated costs, and stakeholders to involve, with particular attention given to seasonal factors and usage patterns. The results were shared through thematic workshops for tour operators, energy providers, and industry professionals, facilitating networking and discussing the practical conditions for activating the services. Additionally, the creation of thematic tourist packages was explored, incorporating local experiences, culinary offerings, and cultural attractions to attract visitors and enhance the unique characteristics of each region. The initiative culminated in a final event that involved experts and institutional representatives [33].

While the project's common goal was the tourism development of rural territories, the implementation of activities varied depending on the local contexts. In some areas, the focus was on strengthening local food systems, with the active participation of agricultural businesses and associations. In others, the main challenge was the creation of tourist itineraries, requiring close collaboration with local institutions such as the mountain consortiums of the Triangolo Lariano and Lario Intelvесе. Another commitment was made to connect diverse stories and locations within the regions, enhancing the cycling network to ensure more sustainable and accessible routes for tourists.

Four main cooperation opportunities were identified: developing a territorial identity through continuous information dissemination about rural areas; the ability to tap into new markets by transforming the Triangolo Lariano into a tourist destination; strengthening projects through the achievement of critical mass, supported by feasibility studies on smart mobility and targeted communication; and promoting a new vision of a unified cross-border rural area.

From a structural standpoint, the activities were adequately aligned with the set objectives, although the timing and workload were initially overestimated. Financial adjustments were needed to balance the remaining time with shared costs. Major challenges included the pandemic crisis and the involvement of local administrations. However, despite these obstacles, the partnership remained focused on achieving the predefined goals.

The expected results were successfully achieved, with positive impacts at the local level, such as welcoming visitors at agricultural businesses, creating a network for territorial enhancement, developing high-quality communication materials, and gathering data on smart mobility, which enabled the creation of five dedicated cycling routes.

Some activities, although carried out as planned, did not yield the expected results. For example, Risorsa Lomellina noted limited adoption of smart mobility in rural areas despite the presence of charging stations in several municipalities. According to the LAG, regular adoption of electric cars by local administrations could promote cultural change, while promoting a cycling network and creating a clear and comprehensive website could improve sustainable mobility between cities and rural areas. Additionally, formalizing agreements with clear rights and duties for all the involved parties could strengthen long-term cooperation. Moreover, some opportunities were not fully exploited, such as the creation of thematic tourist packages and the extension of the project to other LAGs in Austria, France, and Croatia. However, the project contributed to increasing tourist flows in the involved areas and enhancing awareness of available tourist resources. The ability to collect and analyze data on tourist flows and mobility, combined with the use of digital tools to enhance the

visitor experience, fostered the development of sustainable rural tourism, promoted social innovation models, and strengthened networking activities.

#### 4.1.2. Project Impacts and Results

The Project stood out for its innovative identity. According to the LAGs, the project introduced a new approach to tourism development by combining a tailored communication plan with an operational solution for smart mobility in rural areas. For most partners, the main goal was to increase tourist flows, a target that was successfully achieved. However, transforming a region into a tourist destination is a long-term process: while significant progress has been made, the journey is still ongoing.

In terms of impact, the project facilitated the creation and strengthening of local networks, stimulated new collaborations, and promoted a culture of cooperation. This collaborative spirit was enhanced through the direct involvement of local communities, institutions, and businesses, contributing to the development of a strong sense of teamwork and mutual support among participants. Specifically, joint efforts improved the decision-making capacity of the LAGs, fostering the exchange of ideas and perspectives. Communication skills within the partnership also saw notable improvement, thanks to the organization of educational tours and the contributions of industry professionals.

Although intangible results, such as a change in mindset, are difficult to quantify, all partners agree that the region has gained a heightened awareness of its value through cooperation. The pandemic further highlighted the need to increase the visibility of rural areas, particularly in the urban context. This renewed focus has led to the creation of new initiatives to enhance local resources.

Participation in the project has boosted the attractiveness, visibility, and reputation of the LAGs, both locally, through the involvement of numerous businesses and an increase in visitors, and institutionally, with recognition from regional authorities. Although formal cooperation agreements between the LAGs have not yet been established, the project has solidified strong relationships, leaving the possibility of formalizing them in the future.

All partners agree on the importance of promoting ‘competition through collaboration’, while acknowledging that its application depends on the local context. According to the participants, the primary objective of the project was to strengthen territorial planning and cohesion—key elements for sustainable and inclusive tourism development.

#### 4.1.3. Lessons Learned from the Partnership and Local Network

The partners’ approach to cooperation has been open and flexible, with a strong focus on shared similarities and interests. All participants have solid experience in managing cooperation projects, particularly in sustainable tourism and the promotion of rural areas. Some have also developed initiatives related to mobility and cross-border tourism infrastructure. Geographical proximity was a key factor in partner selection, fostering operational and strategic synergies.

One of the main benefits of the collaboration has been the exchange of diverse perspectives and approaches to tackling common challenges. Agreements with industry experts provided the LAGs with professional tools for developing tourism and mobility. In some cases, such as with LAG Lago di Como, the partnership offered an opportunity to leverage prior experiences, contributing to the development of a local initiative focused on promoting family tourism. Furthermore, the project’s supra-regional dimension enabled the LAGs to engage directly with regional authorities on tourism-related issues, while the involvement of high-profile speakers in the workshops strengthened local strategic connections. The entire process also helped enhance the skills of the LAG staff, expanding their expertise in tourism and sustainable mobility.

The local network played a vital role in the project’s success. On one hand, the LAGs received support from agricultural businesses and local promotion associations, fostering new collaborations, such as the one with the “Lomellina Terra di Riso Association”. Specifically, the annual event “Welcome to Lomellina” has become a stable reference point in the region, encouraging city visitors

to explore rural areas through alternative transport options. This initiative allowed participants to discover the local history, traditions, and natural heritage. On the other hand, the involvement of the Association of Municipalities of Oltrepò Mantovano and the municipalities of the Carso region facilitated the design of new cooperation initiatives.

To ensure the sustainability of the project beyond its lifecycle, a new initiative called “Residences and villages” was launched. This evolution not only extends the impact of the original project but aims to make rural areas more attractive to both tourists and residents. The focus is on identifying best practices to combat depopulation and develop new models of territorial development. The added value of this initiative lies in raising awareness of the untapped potential of rural areas, especially within urban contexts. This has created a ripple effect, influencing not only local authorities but also international stakeholders, highlighting the strategic role of rural areas in territorial development policies.

However, to enhance the effectiveness of future initiatives, it will be crucial to refine the implementation of activities, optimizing time and resources. Capitalizing on the strengths of cooperation and the lessons learned can help mitigate potential challenges. The project has shown a good degree of alignment among partners, though there is still room for improvement. Cooperation has been recognized as a valuable element, offering concrete insights for strengthening strategies and enhancing the effectiveness of future actions.

#### *4.2. The Case Study of “Memories and Web TV: Telling the Story of Our Territories.” An Innovative Approach to Promoting Local Areas.*

The transnational cooperation project, implemented between 2018 and 2024 with a financial allocation of just over 300,000 euros, involves two Italian LAGs from the Sardinia region: LAG Sulcis Iglesiente Campidano (the lead LAG) and LAG Marmilla, along with a Spanish LAG, ASIR Sur de Alicante, located in the southern part of the Alicante province.

Although these areas have different orographic characteristics, the territories of the three LAGs share a significant environmental and cultural heritage, as well as a common trend of depopulation [38].

The LAG Sulcis Iglesiente area covers 22 municipalities, out of which 17 in the former Province of Carbonia-Iglesias and 5 in the Province of Cagliari. The region is predominantly hilly and includes 16 municipalities within the “Inner Areas strategy”. It stands out for its unique geological formation, known internationally as the “Oldest plate in Europe,” characterized by a wealth of natural resources and environments of great scientific and cultural interest. However, these resources remain largely underused or unexplored for their tourism potential. In terms of demographics, the medium to long-term analysis reveals a heterogeneous situation: 11 municipalities are in good or acceptable condition, while the remaining 11 face critical, very critical, or precarious conditions [39].

Situated between the provinces of Oristano and Medio Campidano, LAG Marmilla encompasses a predominantly rural area characterized by low population density and dispersed settlements

The region boasts a rich cultural and environmental heritage, including internationally significant archaeological sites, valuable material and immaterial resources. The landscape is dominated by traditional activities such as pastoralism and cereal cultivation, as well as the impressive basalt formations of the Giare, Monte Arci, and Monte Grighini, which are considered unique attractions. The Giare are recognized as Sites of Community Interest (S.I.C.) and are under special protection; Monte Arci, the largest obsidian deposit in the Mediterranean, is set to become a regional park. Additionally, the area retains a network of well-preserved historical villages, which are valuable resources for future development strategies. However, the population is undergoing a sharp decline due to aging and the migration of young people [40].

The ASIR area covers thirteen municipalities in the Alicante province, distributed across the Alacantí, Alto Vinalopó, Medio Vinalopó, Bajo Vinalopó, and Vega Baja regions. This area is located on the border of the Penibetic mountain range, characterized by alternating mountain chains,

depressions, and coastal plains. The presence of rivers and highlands contributes to shaping a unique and dynamic landscape. Despite its rich cultural heritage related to the landscape, local language, traditional crafts, and agri-food production, the area suffers from a lack of protection for traditional knowledge and a lack of policies to enhance these resources. It is also a clearly rural area with low population density and small settlements [41].

Building on the success of the “Youth and Rural Development” project, the “Memories and Web TV” project aims to combat depopulation and socio-economic distress through the rediscovery of local identity. “Memories and Web TV” promotes knowledge and the enhancement of the specific cultural traits, traditional agricultural and craft techniques of the involved territories, while also raising awareness among young generations about the importance of preserving and sharing this knowledge. At the same time, the project seeks to engage young people in the use of new technologies as tools for dissemination. To achieve these goals, it has been conceived as a platform designed to create an international and stimulating environment, fostering the sharing of ideas and knowledge on storytelling within the participating territories [38].

#### 4.2.1. Project Activities

The primary objective of the project was the creation of an international network to promote the involved territories, aiming to engage educational institutions, associations, and new generations, raising awareness about local specificities through innovative learning techniques linked to new information and communication technologies.

The importance of networking was highly emphasized by working simultaneously on three levels: cooperation between young generations and local communities, stimulating their interest in the territory and strengthening the sense of belonging; exchange between local youth and international entities, promoting dialogue and engagement with cultures different from their own; and the dissemination of new multimedia tools both locally and internationally.

The project began with the establishment of a multidisciplinary steering group, active at both the local and international levels. This initiative aimed to highlight the cultural uniqueness of the involved areas, showcasing local products, traditional recipes, historical and contemporary figures, and archaeological sites.

One of the key outcomes of this collaboration was the drafting of the “Charter of Principles”, a formal agreement that defined participation protocols for local stakeholders, outlined future activity implementation methods, and provided guidelines for selecting associations, schools, and participants in the coordination table, as well as for organizing educational workshops.

The workshops offered students aged 11 to 13 years old the opportunity to explore innovative digital tools, enhancing their creative and technical skills. With the support of experts, a digital platform was designed and developed to collect and present the content created by the students, as well as document the activities carried out. The platform, available in both Italian and Spanish, ensured bilingual accessibility and wider dissemination of the project.

Throughout the initiative, an integrated communication campaign was carried out, including the creation of a distinctive logo and coordinated visual identity to strengthen the project's recognition in the involved territories. Dialogue between students, local stakeholders, and LAGs was further encouraged through dissemination events and moments of discussion.

The project culminated in an international event held in Valencia in October 2024, which served as an important opportunity to compare the Italian and Spanish approaches to storytelling and celebrate the results achieved in enhancing and promoting their respective territories.

The partnership was designed to allow local stakeholders—including youth, seniors, associations, tourism and cultural operators, and businesses—along with national and international partners, to compare existing strategies and actions, and develop new approaches based on cooperation. Partners worked together to learn from each other's experiences, increasing awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of their respective territories. Local identity among the youth and



their knowledge of the cultural, natural, architectural, and historical heritage of the area significantly improved. Additionally, young participants gained technical skills in using audiovisual equipment, transforming them into temporary reporters.

Despite the project's overall success, several challenges arose. The pandemic and bureaucratic delays led to changes in the partnership structure and an extended timeline. Additionally, a generational shift among the student participants posed another obstacle: the original group, aged 11 to 13, had completed their schooling by the time the project resumed, requiring the recruitment of new participants.

Nevertheless, nearly all project goals were achieved, and the final outcomes met expectations. The partnership expressed high satisfaction, particularly with the enthusiasm shown by the young participants in the workshops. The students appreciated the opportunity to direct and act in their videos to promote their territory. This not only helped strengthen awareness of the local heritage among students and their families, but also provided tangible tools for storytelling and enhancement.

The international event in Spain also represented another growth opportunity for Sardinian students, teachers, and LAG staff, allowing them to engage with new best practices in various areas, such as educational methodologies, heritage protection, and the definition and implementation of tourism development strategies in rural areas. Furthermore, both Spanish and Italian students had the chance to form new friendships and create potentially lasting bonds.

However, while the activities had positive outcomes, there remains room for improvement in the educational workshops. A more in-depth approach to storytelling the heritage and a greater focus on video production quality could have further amplified the impact.

Finally, while the involvement of schools was a strength of the project, it also posed a challenge: activities had to be suspended during the summer break, which reduced their overall impact. Future development of the project could involve a more flexible program to ensure greater continuity in educational activities.

#### 4.2.2. Project Impacts and Results

The motivations, expectations, and objectives of the project varied among the partners, reflecting their different priorities. The lead LAG, in particular, aimed to engage young people, while Marmilla focused on the educational aspects of the project. ASIR, on the other hand, sought to gain new perspectives through interaction with foreign partners.

The project proved to be innovative for the local context by promoting the use of new technologies applied to cultural heritage and involving an often overlooked audience in such initiatives. Additionally, the study trip provided a valuable opportunity for teenagers, allowing them to develop essential life skills and gain a greater awareness of local traditions and heritage. To further improve future initiatives, the LAGs plan to administer a satisfaction survey to gather feedback on the students' experiences, their opinions on the project, and potential areas for improvement.

For the implementation of the project, the partnership established a Steering Committee, made up exclusively of representatives from the LAGs partners. This body provided strategic guidance to the Project Management Committee, which included at least one technical representative from each partner, ensuring a clear definition of activities and effective project implementation. The organizational structure also improved communication and strengthened administrative skills within the partnership, optimizing workflow and preventing potential issues that could have compromised activities for the students. Better coordination also facilitated the success of the workshops and the international event abroad.

Furthermore, the LAGs expanded their network of contacts, increased their visibility in other regions, and recognized the untapped potential of collaborating with educational institutions. Participation in the project also highlighted the international dimension of the LEADER approach, demonstrating its ability to create connections at the European level.

Students and teachers developed a deeper awareness of the importance of preserving ancestral knowledge in rural contexts. They also gained trust in the LAGs and a more comprehensive

understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to cooperation. Particularly significant was the impact on the visibility of the LAGs. The enthusiasm generated by the project led to an increasing number of inquiries about when new similar initiatives would be launched, indicating growing interest from rural communities.

The experience underscored the value of exchanging different perspectives, allowing participants to develop a deeper understanding of their environment and cultural identity. Memories and Web TV successfully created a bridge between cultural heritage and younger generations. By independently selecting which resources to share with their peers, participants strengthened their sense of awareness and belonging, thereby solidifying their territorial identity.

By fostering wide community involvement, the creation of the videos became a collective effort, with local residents providing support, suggestions, and ideas. This not only reinforced trust in the project but also helped strengthen social bonds within the community. The LAGs built and maintained a valuable network of contacts with relevant partners both within and outside their areas of expertise. Among these were museums that represent examples of best practices and educational farms, laying the groundwork for future projects, some of which are already under discussion.

Transparency was a fundamental principle throughout the process, encouraging participants to collaborate rather than compete. Students demonstrated altruism and team spirit, prioritizing mutual support and shared learning. This approach fostered new forms of solidarity and territorial cohesion, creating a more inclusive environment for the younger generations and for the future of the community.

#### 4.2.3. Lessons Learned from the Partnership and Local Network

The three LAGs possess varying levels of experience in cooperation, both in terms of the number and type of projects undertaken. The most experienced LAG, Sulcis, took on the role of lead LAG due to its in-depth knowledge of cooperation methodologies and its involvement in important issues in recent years. For example, the topic of cultural identity, central to Memories and Web TV, had already been addressed in the former project "MeDIETerranea" which explored the Mediterranean diet not only as a food model but also as a system of identity values. Moreover, with the project "Youth and Rural Development," Sulcis had already established collaborations with schools, although with a greater focus on the cultural, historical, and anthropological aspects of rural areas.

The cooperation within the project proved to be a significant opportunity for mutual learning among all the partners, due to their diverse experiences. The two Italian LAGs had previously worked together on the project "Shortening Distances," aimed at strengthening the local supply chain, with Marmilla serving as the lead LAG. Memories and Web TV represented the first cooperation between the Italian LAGs and the Spanish partner, as well as the first transnational project for LAG ASIR, which had only participated in inter-territorial cooperation initiatives up to that point. Nevertheless, ASIR had already built strong working alliances and made a positive impact on its territory, elements that facilitated the success of the project. Additionally, the schools selected for the workshops in Italy had previous experience with Erasmus+ projects, having collaborated with foreign partners before.

By facing challenges and overcoming obstacles together, each partner gained new skills, supported by the constant and targeted coordination of the lead LAG. Sulcis demonstrated the importance of clearly defining roles and activities, ensuring a more efficient workflow. Meanwhile, the Spanish LAG, less experienced than the Italian partners, had the opportunity to deepen its understanding of multi-fund strategies, which had already been successfully adopted by Sulcis and Marmilla.

This cooperation offered participants a unique perspective on similar cultures, each with its own distinct characteristics. The Italian partners were particularly impressed by the Spanish region's commitment to preserving and transmitting cultural heritage, while the Spanish partner found inspiration in the Italian approach, which placed strong emphasis on actively involving young people, a target group that had been largely overlooked by ASIR until then.

The support of local stakeholders, along with the strong network of contacts established through the project, was instrumental in ensuring the overall quality of the initiative

All participants demonstrated strong commitment to collaboration and respect for the agreements made. The interaction between students, teachers, professionals, and the community strengthened local identities, extending the project's impact beyond regional borders.

The territorial network created through the project sparked new ideas and perspectives on various related themes. For example, it highlighted opportunities in the active tourism sector, involving schools and local actors such as water sports instructors, hiking guides, and environmental experts. This collaborative approach laid the foundation for future projects aimed at enhancing the territory and its resources, reinforcing the role of LAGs as promoters of local development and innovation.

The sustainability of the project is built on the relationships established and the web platform developed. On one hand, schools and institutions can continue the path that has been set: new students with the same teachers or new schools with shared objectives can carry the initiative forward. On the other hand, the platform represents a strategic resource for the future, while the videos created by the students can be reused to promote the territory as a tourist destination. By integrating the promotion of natural heritage, the project contributes to more balanced and sustainable territorial development.

The results achieved can be further strengthened through new initiatives that intertwine cultural and environmental heritage. Additionally, policymakers have expressed their willingness to continue the collaboration, while representatives from the involved municipalities have shown their full support for the continuity of the project.

#### 4.3. The Case Study of the Project *"Landscapes to live: Immersive experiences for sustainable tourism."*

The LEADER cooperation project is of the interterritorial type. It began in 2019 and concluded in 2022, with a financial allocation of just under 600,000 euros. The project involves all six LAGs in the Emilia-Romagna region, combining the territorial characteristics of the area with administrative boundaries, presenting both challenges and opportunities.

The LAG Valli Marecchia e Conca covers two areas named after their respective valleys. The Marecchia Valley extends from Novafeltria to Coriano, encompassing valleys that run perpendicular to the Apennine mountain range. The Conca Valley stretches from the hills to the sea, which remains a constant presence in the landscape. The predominantly hilly territory is further enriched by the presence of the Sasso Simone and Simoncello Park, alongside nine Natura 2000 sites, adding considerable environmental value to the area. It is characterized by areas of intensive and specialized agriculture (13 municipalities) alongside other rural areas classified as having development challenges (7 municipalities) [42].

The LAG Delta 2000 is located along the Po River's banks in an area of high environmental value, where Ramsar and Natura 2000 sites provide special significance to the landscape, further enhanced by the presence of the Po Delta Park. The territory, predominantly flat, includes intermediate rural areas (13 municipalities), areas dominated by intensive and specialized agriculture (5 municipalities), and urban and peri-urban zones (1 municipality). The social dimension of the area is marked by a strong demographic decline, particularly among the younger population. The importance of agriculture in the local economy has shifted due to increased awareness of the cultural and environmental identity of these places, leading to the diversification of economic activities [43].

The LAG Appennino Bolognese area is characterized by foothill and mountainous zones, traversed by a series of valleys running perpendicular to the main ridge. The network of watercourses from the Apennine basin, except for the Samoggia River, which is linked to the Monte Acuto plain, defines the area's morphology, along with its forest coverage. Out of the 26 municipalities involved, 13 are mountainous, and 13 are hilly. Additionally, 20 municipalities fall under the "Inner Areas strategy", meaning they are significantly distant from the major centers providing essential services (education, healthcare, and mobility). The entire territory is shaped by geomorphological features

that define its environment, vegetation cover, habitats, and, ultimately, its history and culture. The population and institutions have long recognized the potential of the environmental system of the Bolognese Apennines, responding with the establishment of six regional parks, typically medium to large in size. The area is served by a network of hiking trails that has been nearly fully connected through both public and volunteer efforts [44].

The territory covered by the LAG L'Altra Romagna can be described as the sides of an imaginary quadrilateral, bordered to the east by the Adriatic Sea and to the west by the eastern side of the Apennines. It is marked to the northwest and southeast by two lines that are approximately perpendicular to both the Adriatic and the Apennine ridge. Excluding the plains, which occupy about two-sevenths of the territory, the remaining areas are hills and mountains. The National Parks of the Casentinesi Forests, Monte Falterona, and Campigna, as well as the Regional Park of the Vena del Gesso Romagnola, represent the significant value of the environmental resources in the area. Of the 25 municipalities involved, 5 are mountainous, 18 are hilly, and 2 are flat. Furthermore, 8% of the municipalities (2) are small municipalities with a maximum of 1,000 inhabitants [45].

The area where the LAG del Ducato operates between Parma and Piacenza includes about 60 municipalities, mostly mountainous, extending from the Val Tidone to the eastern outskirts of Parma, crossing the Val Trebbia, Val Nure, Val d'Arda, Val Ceno, and Val Taro. The high prevalence of wooded areas and the presence of zones of significant natural value have facilitated the establishment of numerous protected areas under the Natura 2000 network, as well as two large natural parks. The area also has strong tourist appeal (hospitality in villages, ridge trail routes, etc.) [46].

The territory of the LAG Antico Frignano is predominantly mountainous and includes 31 municipalities in the provinces of Modena and Reggio Emilia. A key strength of the environmental context in the LAG area is the richness of its natural and environmental resources, with landscapes of extraordinary uniqueness, which include a national park, two regional parks, and numerous Sites of Community Importance (SCI) and Special Protection Areas (SPA) [47].

The diversity of territorial specifics presented a challenge, as the project covers areas ranging from mountainous regions to coastal zones, each with its own unique characteristics, needs, and priorities. All the six LAGs benefited from sharing the same administrative framework and a common regional vision aimed at enhancing and protecting the landscape, as outlined in the Regional Landscape Territorial Plan. This alignment supported the establishment of the Regional Landscape Observatory, strengthening a unified approach to safeguarding and promoting the region's diverse landscapes. By supporting this initiative, the LAGs integrated their efforts with the Region's strategy, promoting the development of local observatories and, through a shared methodological approach, providing a unified interpretation of the regional landscapes, each with its own unique features [42].

#### 4.3.1. Project Activities

The project aims to safeguard and enhance the unique and diverse landscapes of the Emilia-Romagna region by integrating a unified methodological approach with the distinctive characteristics of each territory. This goal was pursued through research initiatives and activities designed to engage local communities.

The main strength lies in its focus on fostering connections despite the differences among the territories. Significant efforts were dedicated to coordinating activities, aligning goals and indicators, and developing a cohesive methodology for landscape analysis that captures the evolution of the territories and their histories over time.

Following detailed studies of each area, targeted local actions were implemented to address specific needs. In some areas, decorative installations such as the "Grand Frames" and rest areas were introduced to highlight the scenic beauty of the landscapes. In other zones, material interventions focused on enhancing natural sites, while in others, storytelling techniques were used to enrich narratives about the evolution of the landscapes.

All local actions were accompanied by extensive community engagement initiatives, encouraging active participation. The results of the project were shared through informative panels.



Encouraging residents to develop a strong sense of belonging to their landscapes, recognizing their uniqueness and shared traces of a common past, was the primary objective of the project's activities. Additionally, significant efforts were made to involve regional observers, municipalities, municipal unions, and managers of protected areas.

The LEADER cooperation framework provided the LAGs with the resources to establish a collaborative network, acting as a bridge between regional institutions and local actors. This strengthened relationships between the various institutional and non-institutional actors involved in landscape management issues. The exchange of experiences played a crucial role in fostering community involvement and participation.

At the activity implementation level, delays and adjustments occurred due to bureaucratic and administrative obstacles, exacerbated by the pandemic crisis, which significantly increased the workload.

Among the most rewarding outcomes were the insights gained from landscape studies, the traveling exhibition, and the creation of observation points throughout the region. The partnership remained cohesive throughout the project. However, despite achieving the expected results, the six partners decided not to continue further collaborations on this topic in the next programming period. Although there were no internal conflicts, the burdensome administrative process discouraged the partners from pursuing additional future cooperative efforts.

#### 4.3.2. Project Impacts and Results

The concept of enhancing landscapes for tourism and sustainable use through historical and cultural walking routes is not in itself an innovation. However, the real innovation lies in the management and development methods of these initiatives. Several interventions were implemented that involved the active participation of local stakeholders, each contributing uniquely to a common goal. The fundamental principle is that themes such as tourism development and the promotion of local products are intrinsically linked to the care and protection of the landscape. The Project provided an opportunity to reflect on the regional context, examining how it has evolved over the years and identifying strategies to protect and enhance it for future generations.

Through the sharing of knowledge and best practices, the project contributed to raising environmental sustainability awareness among the local community, promoting more respectful and responsible attitudes toward nature. Residents of the participating areas became increasingly aware of their belonging to a unique environmental habitat, rich in productive, culinary, and cultural traditions. In many areas, the exhibition remained open beyond the official duration of the project, reflecting its impact. This newfound curiosity also extended to some LAG staff members, who initially had limited knowledge of the subject, opening new ways to promote landscapes both nationally and internationally.

Regarding the benefits gained by the LAGs from the cooperation project, key competencies such as decision-making ability, strengthened cooperation between LAGs with many common features working within the same region despite local differences, and a more participatory approach have improved. However, there is some skepticism about how these improvements will impact day-to-day operations and administrative practices.

The most significant impact of the project lies in the enhancement of territorial identity. This was achieved through local actions, such as organizing informational sessions in various locations that combined project presentations with brief landscape observation walks. Additionally, the traveling exhibition helped strengthen the region's identity. The project also facilitated the involvement of various local stakeholders who had the opportunity to develop a shared vision of the territory and its unique characteristics, which they now recognize as areas worthy of investment. Moreover, the project's theme was further developed not only through this cooperation initiative but also through additional measures.

One of the most valuable outcomes of the project was the improvement of the LAGs' ability to address and develop key issues for their local communities. Despite the challenges in implementing

a project through the LEADER cooperation, numerous informal networks were established, demonstrating a commitment to ongoing collaboration in developing the LAG areas. Additionally, some existing networks were strengthened, such as the LAG del Ducato, which engaged two universities, two provincial administrations, and several municipal administrations. While local components brought their intentions and perspectives, all actions were shared and developed in a spirit of cooperation. Even financial decisions were carefully planned, ensuring alignment with the project's objectives. Each partner operated within this philosophy, sharing their experiences without overly focusing on individual agendas but maintaining strong cohesion and a focus on the project's activities. The cooperation effort successfully facilitated interactions and collaborations among various actors from different sectors of the region's economy. Relations between entities at different levels, which had never existed before, were also promoted. The key challenge now is to maintain and cultivate these new local networks, a task that will undoubtedly require significant effort and sustained commitment.

#### 4.3.3. Lessons Learned from the Partnership and Local Network

The partnership is actively engaged in other cooperation projects, primarily focused on tourism. These include initiatives such as Ecomuseums, which closely integrate cultural heritage with territorial attractiveness, and trekking routes that highlight the historical roots of the regions through designated trails. Most partners have extensive experience in transnational cooperation, with the exception of Appennino Bolognese, which has traditionally operated at regional and national levels.

Despite procedural complexities, the partnership strongly believes in the value of cooperation, which offers invaluable learning opportunities, fosters the development of new project ideas, and establishes essential networks for the exchange of best practices. These collaborative efforts have enabled the LAGs to share visions and ideas on common themes from different perspectives, channel resources into previously unexplored areas, and promote innovation.

The project also strengthened relationships among the LAGs, who worked with professionalism and commitment, expanding their networks beyond their individual territories. At the local level, the exchange of perspectives facilitated the emergence of initiatives that would not have developed from a single viewpoint, allowing stakeholders from different areas to learn from one another. This added significant value to the project and inspired new opportunities for cooperation. For example, stakeholders and administrators who participated in the study visits later supported similar initiatives aimed at promoting and enhancing local landscapes. However, it is important to note that many local administrators still lack sufficient awareness and adequate preparation to act independently on landscape-related issues, reflecting a broader cultural development process that requires time and sustained commitment.

In addition to financial contributions, the LAGs played a key role in coordinating activities, encouraging new participation, and supporting initiatives. They also facilitated the expansion of local networks, making everyone's involvement essential to the project's success.

The project successfully attracted the attention of policymakers and included an exit strategy to ensure the sustainability of implemented activities. In some cases, this led to the creation of managing entities, such as in the Marecchia Valleys, where public asset owners committed to maintaining sites and assets for at least five years, either directly or through agreements with other parties. In other areas, such as Altra Romagna, the project's continuation will rely on the work of Local Observatories and the LAG itself.

The project outcomes have been integrated into the 2023–2027 programming period. It is now clear that a synergistic and coordinated approach with other rural areas in the region is necessary to share experiences related to landscape issues and to support the creation and functioning of Local Observatories.

Finally, the project has also paved the way for the implementation of additional pilot initiatives aimed at further enhancing the landscape.

#### 4.4. The Case Study of the Project *"The Rediscovered Garden: A Transnational Project to Recover and Revitalize Traditional Agricultural Practices."*

"The Rediscovered Garden" is a transnational cooperation project carried out between 2019 and 2021, with a total budget of just over 250,000 euro. The three LAGs involved—Alto Bellunese (lead LAG), Montagna Vicentina, and Regions Management Osttirol (Austria)—represent mountain regions united by a shared commitment to safeguarding local heritage and promoting regional distinctiveness [48].

The Alto Bellunese area consists of 40 neighboring municipalities, all classified as mountain communities within the Province of Belluno. Of these, 17 are designated as small municipalities, and 29 are part of the "Inner Areas strategy". Known for its high environmental value, 9.6% of the area lies within national or regional parks. However, the region has faced steady depopulation since the 1980s, driven by low birth rates and significant youth emigration, leading to an increasingly aging population [49].

The territory covered by the Montagna Vicentina LAG is predominantly mountainous and includes both rural areas with developmental challenges and zones of intensive, specialized agriculture. Out of the 44 municipalities, 32 are mountainous, 10 hilly, and just 2 located in the plains, with most classified as small communities. Ongoing depopulation in the region presents a serious threat, including land degradation, hydrogeological instability, and the loss of traditional economic activities [50].

The Regions Management Osttirol (RMO) LAG area lies in the south of the main Alpine ridge, bordering Austria's Salzburg and Carinthia regions and Italy's South Tyrol and Veneto. It includes 33 municipalities with Lienz as the main urban center and encompasses several important valleys, such as the Puster Valley, Isel Valley, Deferegggen Valley, Virgen Valley, Kals Valley, and the Tiroler Gail and Lesach Valleys. Dominated by the Hohe Tauern and Carnic Alps, agriculture in East Tyrol is typically small-scale and secondary. While tourism is a key economic sector, it is less developed here than in North Tyrol [48].

During the 2007–2013 programming period, the three LAGs had already cooperated under the LEADER project "The Forgotten Garden" and the cross-border cooperation project "The Lost Crop Biodiversity in the Gardens and Fields of East Tyrol and Belluno", funded within the INTERREG IV A Italy–Austria Programme.

As a direct continuation of those efforts, The Rediscovered Garden also works in synergy with BioColAlp – *Reviving and Promoting Biodiversity in Alpine Crops*, part of the Interreg VA Italy–Austria Programme under the Dolomiti Live CLLD strategy. The focus is on conserving ancient plants and seeds while researching new crop varieties.

The project has two main objectives: 1) to promote and support sustainable land management through practical, demonstrative actions; 2) to recover and preserve traditional local varieties of edible plants, thus enhancing cultivated biodiversity.

The initiative also aims to raise awareness of the value of mountain agriculture, targeting professional and hobby farmers alike, along with the general public, tourists, students, and local practitioners. More broadly, it presents a renewed vision of Alpine areas, emphasizing their economic potential and quality-of-life benefits—with the ultimate goal of inspiring younger generations to reconnect with rural life and appreciate its unique resources and traditions.

##### 4.4.1. Project Activities

The main activities carried out by the LAGs, along with the measurable impacts and results achieved, highlight the depth and long-term value of the partners' cooperation efforts. United by a shared commitment to sustainable development and the enhancement of mountain agriculture, the three LAGs strengthened their expertise and expanded their networks, fostering meaningful connections among key local stakeholders.

A shared vision of mountain farming and its value to the community led to the establishment of two centers dedicated to documenting and promoting cultivated biodiversity, with a particular focus

on preserving indigenous seed varieties. These centers aim to safeguard and celebrate agricultural diversity while raising environmental awareness, promoting cultural heritage, and supporting sustainability among both local residents and visitors.

One of the project's central components involved organizing training and informational sessions for farmers—as guardians of biodiversity—and for mountain guides, focusing on natural resources and the critical link between land stewardship and sustainable rural tourism. The LAGs also enhanced existing tourist trails by integrating multimedia features such as QR codes linked to informational totems, enriching the visitor's experience and deepening their understanding of the natural and cultural heritage.

The three LAGs saw cooperation as an opportunity to expose local actors to best practices and new perspectives. This knowledge exchange served as inspiration to innovate within their own regions in the fields of mountain agriculture and rural tourism. With this goal in mind, study visits were organized in all three partner territories, involving farmers and local administrators.

In the Alto Bellunese area, a dedicated association was established to ensure the project's continuity, and two pilot initiatives helped finance the renovation of buildings in San Tomaso Agordino (Belluno) and Roana (Vicenza) to serve as biodiversity centers.

Moreover, some results exceeded initial expectations. Originally, study visits were planned only for the RMO LAG as part of the partnership meetings. However, the three LAGs quickly recognized the broader value of these visits as opportunities to explore diverse local contexts, generate new ideas for territorial development, and offer practical solutions to participants. As a result, they expanded the number of study visits.

The strong interest shown by institutions (universities, schools, etc.) and local communities in visiting the new centers, the high number of participants in the study trips, and the involvement of highly skilled professionals confirmed the project's success at the local level. Two outcomes were considered especially meaningful: the data collected on traditional Vicenza varieties of cereals, vegetables, and fruit, and the "Mountain Farming Cultural Landscape Guide" training course organized by RMO. These, along with the exchange of knowledge and the satisfaction derived from collaborative teamwork, were among the most valued results of the project.

#### 4.4.2. Project Impacts and Results

Following the positive experience gained through the "Forgotten Garden" 2007-2013 project, the "Rediscovered Garden" was conceived with high expectations and the clear intention of building on past results. The need to continue the previous LEADER project was voiced directly by the local communities. Local stakeholders expressed their desire for renewed momentum and a stronger focus on mountain agriculture, biodiversity preservation, and rural tourism, encouraging the Austrian LAG to continue fostering intercultural cooperation. It is fair to say that these expectations were met, with collaboration extending beyond funding opportunities and confirming both the achievement of objectives and the positive regional impact of the project.

The project stands out for its multidimensional innovation. It generated new knowledge through research on cultivated biodiversity, established a specialized community by enabling 'guardian farmers' to work on experimental plots sowing and reviving ancient seeds, and preserved memory and tradition through the creation of seed centers.

From a tourism development perspective, the project promoted not only the territory itself but also the identity of the local community. This allowed visitors to discover the region's true richness, while empowering local people to protect and promote the environmental, social, and economic aspects of their lives. The project also fostered new economic opportunities. The "Cultural Landscape Guide for Mountain Farming" training course provided farmers with an additional source of income and supported sustainable tourism, passing on knowledge about the cultural landscape, biodiversity, and climate-related themes. Furthermore, it was innovative in how it involved local people—as knowledge keepers—in actively preserving, caring for, and promoting their land to support rural tourism.



The impacts of the project were significant for both the LAGs and their regions. Internally, the LAGs strengthened their organizational and coordination capacities. Externally, local stakeholders had the opportunity to participate in innovative pilot projects.

One of the most notable outcomes was the increased knowledge gained through the exchange among partners. The cooperation facilitated the exchange of experiences and good practices, helping to identify shared challenges and develop joint solutions. The transnational aspect of the exchange, in particular, inspired fresh ideas and novel approaches that might not have emerged at the regional level. On one hand, the project supported land cultivation and stewardship by engaging a wide range of local stakeholders—including farmers, administrators, and citizens interested in the project's themes creating a replicable model. Working toward shared goals encouraged partners to align their views and beliefs about mountain agriculture and rural tourism. The similarities between the territories fostered shared values and heightened awareness of local resources. On the other hand, it enabled the recovery and preservation of traditional edible plant varieties and the knowledge surrounding their cultivation and use, promoting both cultivated biodiversity and rural tourism. All three LAGs emphasized how this cooperation improved their decision-making abilities. Their previous collaboration was crucial in helping them navigate the administrative complexity of the current project and effectively manage delays—even across national borders.

The role of the LAGs was essential—they acted both as catalysts and mediators among stakeholders who placed their trust in the project and in cooperation itself. By identifying needs and potential within the territory, the LAGs helped local actors move away from individualistic approaches and toward mutual support.

The visibility and positive reputation generated by the project and its communication activities attracted new members interested in joining LAGs initiatives. This strengthened partnership, built on effective collaboration, is one of the project's lasting achievements. Its sustainability lies in a strong commitment to promoting mountain areas beyond the limitations of funding cycles. While it may be difficult to directly attribute an increase in solidarity among local actors to the project, there is a clear rise in their interest in learning from and collaborating with other territories and countries.

#### 4.4.3. Lessons Learned from the Partnership and Local Network

The three partners have extensive experience in managing cooperation projects across various key sectors. The Alto Bellunese LAG has focused on landscape protection, the promotion of forest products, and, together with its partners, on supporting mountain agriculture and preserving cultivated biodiversity. Their collaboration began during the 2007–2013 programming period, where they discovered that exchanging ideas and fostering mutual understanding among local actors across the three regions brought significant benefits. This success motivated them to continue working together.

Their joint efforts in the “Forgotten Garden” project highlighted the value of an effective network, equipping them with the skills needed to participate in another territorial cooperation programme (Interreg) and to extend the project's positive outcomes to their communities.

Participation in the “Rediscovered Garden” proved to be a learning experience for all involved. Alto Bellunese strengthened its capacity in organizing study visits, coordination, and communication. Montagna Vicentina and RMO particularly valued the networking opportunities and relationships that formed among the partners. A major benefit of the cooperation was the chance to connect with other organizations - which are often small or niche - which they would not have encountered otherwise. These exchanges offered new perspectives, encouraging each partner to reassess their internal processes and approaches with fresh eyes.

The study visits provided participants with knowledge and experiences beyond what they could have gained within their local contexts. The project successfully fostered meaningful interaction and networking among local actors, enabling exchanges between decision-makers, farmers, students, and other stakeholders.

The cooperation was so rewarding that, beyond the LEADER project, additional areas of cooperation emerged, such as saffron cultivation and snail farming. This demonstrates the partners' ability to sustain long-term collaborations, both at the local level and among the LAGs themselves.

By addressing both environmental and socio-economic sustainability, the project aims to create a model that not only supports mountain agriculture and rural tourism but also encourages ongoing cooperation and shared resource management among regions. These elements contribute to building a resilient framework capable of adapting to future challenges and continuing to deliver benefits to the communities involved.

However, the project faced several significant challenges, including limited funding, staff shortages, and time constraints, difficulties further exacerbated by pandemic-related delays that impacted resource planning. Despite these obstacles, the project successfully inspired policymakers to support new initiatives and to strengthen structures that continue the work initiated, particularly those focused on biodiversity.

The most effective path toward sustainability has proven to be the active involvement of local actors. For instance, the seed center in Alto Bellunese is now managed by "APS Orti Rupestri" (Rock Gardens Social Promotion Association) a formal association established specifically for this purpose. Similarly, the cataloguing center in Montagna Vicentina is run by a local biodistrict. These results suggest that the project's outcomes can serve as replicable models for future cooperation efforts and can benefit other regions as well.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

This study explored the added value of LEADER cooperation projects in advancing rural development across the European Union, with particular attention to the role of qualitative data in evaluating their outcomes. At the heart of the research lies the principle of cooperation not only among LAGs but also across territories and national borders. This cooperative model fosters strong networks, enhances social capital, and reinforces multi-level governance, all of which contribute to more effective, sustainable, and innovative rural development strategies. By fostering partnerships among Local Action Groups (LAGs), the projects created a fertile ground for knowledge exchange, joint learning, and shared innovation, ultimately contributing to more adaptive, context-sensitive, and inclusive development strategies.

The research adopted a qualitative case study methodology, focusing on selected LEADER cooperation projects implemented in various European Union regions. Data collection methods included document analysis, interviews with project stakeholders, and participatory observation during study visits and collaborative activities. The analysis sheds light on cooperation dynamics, community engagement, knowledge exchange, and governance innovation.

The findings reveal that LEADER cooperation projects are not merely instruments of project delivery but engines of structural transformation. The qualitative case studies examined in this research demonstrate how cooperation projects contributed to reframing territorial identities, particularly through the active involvement of youth and the integration of external perspectives. This reframing often catalyzed a broader strategic outlook, deepening community awareness of local assets and challenges, and fostering a renewed sense of belonging and agency. Key findings show that one of the most significant outcomes of these cooperation projects is the increase in knowledge and skills among partners, enabled by continuous dialogue and shared achievements. Projects such as the "Rediscovered Garden" and "Memory and Web TV" illustrate how cooperation facilitated not only knowledge exchange but also a reframing of territorial identity. Interaction with external perspectives—particularly among youth—encouraged communities to critically reflect on their cultural and environmental assets.

Through continuous dialogue, participatory activities, and collaborative governance structures, the projects enabled stronger ties between sectors such as agriculture, tourism, and education, while bridging generational and institutional divides. The emergence of shared norms and trust-based

networks enhanced decision-making capacity and promoted more democratic, bottom-up approaches to local governance.

The transnational dimension of cooperation added another layer of value by amplifying visibility, increasing critical mass, and facilitating cross-border alignment of strategies and resources. Projects that brought together partners from diverse regions fostered mutual learning, solidarity, and shared problem-solving, with the support of more experienced LAGs enabling the co-creation of innovative solutions tailored to the specific needs of rural areas.

The supra-local dimension boosted the critical mass and visibility of partners, aligning initiatives and resources toward common local development goals—such as the creation of landscape observatories and place-based promotional events—thereby fostering more coherent and participatory strategies. This dimension also helped overcome geographic and institutional isolation, shifting the logic from competition to cooperation and reinforcing the European ideal of unity in diversity.

Governance innovations, such as coordination committees and project steering bodies, played a key role in translating strategic visions into actionable outcomes. These structures not only facilitated project implementation but also mitigated operational risks associated with complexity and administrative burdens. The implementation phase required translating joint strategies into actionable steps, identifying and overcoming challenges in collaboration with other project partners. Notably, more experienced LAGs often acted as mentors, providing crucial support and building capacity among less experienced partners—a dynamic that strengthened the overall resilience and scalability of the initiatives.

Community engagement, though challenging at times, emerged as a cornerstone of project success. Meaningful involvement of local actors through workshops, study visits, and pilot actions fostered ownership, legitimacy, and continuity. In many cases, the engagement process itself led to empowerment, with community members assuming leadership roles and contributing to the institutionalization of participatory governance practices.

The long-term impacts of LEADER cooperation projects extend well beyond their immediate objectives. Examples such as biodiversity conservation initiatives, cultural heritage preservation, and school-based exchange programs illustrate how these projects have spurred lasting social and environmental benefits.

Across the case studies, the exchange of best practices—particularly in biodiversity conservation and cultural heritage—enabled partners to co-develop solutions, shift perspectives, and reinforce the value of cooperation. The impact of these projects extended beyond their immediate goals, often catalyzing long-term structural changes. The capacity of these initiatives to generate ripple effects—such as the creation of new local economies or the sustained involvement of civil society actors—demonstrates their potential as catalysts for systemic change. For example, the “Rediscovered Garden” developed a model for sustaining mountain agriculture and rural tourism through cooperation and dialogue, enhancing territorial resilience. Similarly, “Memory and Web TV” encouraged young people to reimagine their region, fostering a broader sense of identity and purpose.

These transformative effects were especially pronounced in transnational projects, which nurtured a European spirit of solidarity and learning, though they were also evident at the national level. Projects such as “Rural Horizons” and “Landscapes to Live In” demonstrated how overcoming isolation and fostering integration can break competitive logic in favor of collaboration.

LEADER cooperation projects have consistently delivered outcomes that traditional governance mechanisms struggle to achieve. By forging new networks, catalyzing initiatives, and engaging policymakers, these projects have significantly influenced topics like sustainable tourism and biodiversity. The mutual perspective-sharing among partners helped LAGs to identify new challenges and seize development opportunities, thereby strengthening social capital and technical capacities.

Shared networks, common norms, and trust fostered a more inclusive decision-making environment, leading to more effective responses to local needs. Participants frequently reported improved collaboration, communication, and technical expertise, enabling them to play a more active role in designing and implementing development strategies. Appointing effective coordinators and establishing governance bodies (e.g., coordination committees) streamlined workflows and enhanced administrative capacity.

In terms of long-term impact, it emerged that LEADER cooperation projects support not only measurable outcomes but also sustainable, structural change. They stimulate innovation, revive traditional knowledge, and engage previously marginalized actors. These innovations include biodiversity seed banks, school-based cultural exchanges, and local associations assuming formal project management roles, ensuring sustainability beyond the funding period.

Most projects sustained their outcomes through local ownership and strategic partnerships with local and supra-local institutions. Training and networking activities further reinforced future strategy design and implementation. Successful pilot actions demonstrated strong potential for replication and scalability.

Nevertheless, the study also highlights persistent challenges that must be addressed to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of cooperation projects. Administrative complexity, varying regulatory interpretations among Member States, and external shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic have exposed vulnerabilities in project design and implementation. These factors underscore the need for better regulatory harmonization, more realistic planning, and broader stakeholder involvement from the early stages of project design.

Despite these issues, cooperation projects overwhelmingly demonstrated alignment between partners, with 'competition through cooperation' serving as a cornerstone of success. Territorial cohesion proved essential to overcoming obstacles and generating collective impact. LEADER cooperation projects go beyond the delivery of planned activities. They cultivate enduring networks, empower local actors, and promote transformative, place-based development. By aligning with community needs, reinforcing LAG leadership, and enabling context-specific solutions, these projects contribute to a stronger and more unified rural Europe, grounded in solidarity, mutual learning, and territorial cohesion.

Ultimately, LEADER cooperation projects represent a powerful model for reimagining rural development. They offer pathways to innovation grounded in local knowledge and collaborative action. Their added value lies in their capacity to empower communities, bridge territorial divides, and foster governance systems that are more responsive, participatory, and resilient. As the EU continues to prioritize place-based and citizen-driven development, through the LEADER methodology and the principles of Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), these projects foster inclusive, sustainable, and innovative rural development. They empower communities, strengthen local leadership, and contribute to a more cohesive and resilient rural Europe.

By nurturing a culture of cooperation, reinforcing local leadership, and investing in networks of trust, LEADER cooperation projects help build a stronger, more cohesive, and future-ready rural Europe. Their success demonstrates that meaningful change arises not from top-down mandates, but from empowered communities working together toward shared goals—across boundaries, sectors, and generations.



**Author Contributions:** The authors contributed equally as co-first authors. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** Please add: This research received funding from the Italian Network for Rural Development 2014–2020, ReteL.E.A.D.E.R. project, co-financed by European agricultural fund for rural development. This project is managed by the Italian Ministry of Agriculture, Food Sovereignty and Forests" (MASAF).

**Data Availability Statement:** The full dataset is available on the web site [www.reterurale.it/cooperazione\\_leader](http://www.reterurale.it/cooperazione_leader). More information and the full data can be required to the authors of present work.

**Acknowledgments:** The authors thank Italian Ministry of Agriculture, Food Sovereignty and Forests" for supporting this study and all the LAGs involved in the survey for providing the fundamental information basis of this work.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

- Guerrero-Ocampo, S.B.; Díaz-Puente, J.M.; Nuñez Espinoza, J.F. Multi-Actor Partnerships for Agricultural Interactive Innovation: Findings from 17 Case Studies in Europe. *Land* 2022, 11, 1847. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land11101847>
- European Commission. Implementation of LEADER measures in rural development programmes 2014–2022. State of play February 2022. Brussels, Belgium.
- EUROPEAN COMMISSION – Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development – Unit A.3. Guidelines - Assessing the added value of LEADER; Brussels, Belgium, 2024.
- LRDP LTD. Ex-post evaluation of the INTERREG II Community Initiative (1994–99). Technical Report 1, Contract No: 2002.CE.16.0.AT.138; London, UK, 2003.
- Lähtenmäki-Smith, K.; Dubois, A. Collective learning through transnational co-operation - The case of Interreg IIIB, Nordregio WP 2006:4
- Dabinett, G. Transnational spatial planning – insights from practices in the European Union. *Urban Policy and Research* 2006, 24(2), 283 – 290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08111140600704723>
- Janin Rivolin, U. Shaping European spatial planning: How Italy's experience can contribute. *Town Planning Review* 2003, 74(1), 51 – 76. <https://doi.org/10.3828/tpr.74.1.4>
- Pedrazzini, L. Applying the ESDP through INTERREG IIIB: A southern perspective, *European Planning Studies*, 2005, 13(2), 297–317. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0965431042000321848>
- Giannakourou, G. Transforming spatial planning policy in Mediterranean countries: Europeanization and domestic change. *European Planning Studies* 2005, 13(2), 319 – 331. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0365431042000321857>
- Dabinett, G.; Richardson, T. The Europeanisation of spatial strategy: Shaping regions and spatial justice through governmental ideas. *International Planning Studies* 2005, 10(3 – 4), 201 – 218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563470500378549>
- Hall, P. Policy paradigms, social learning and the state. *Comparative Politics* 1993, 25(3), 275 – 296.
- Jenkins-Smith, H.; Sabatier, P., Eds. *Policy Change and Learning: An Advocacy Coalition Approach*; Publisher: Oxford, Westview Press, 1993.
- Wolman, H.; Page, E. Policy transfer among local governments: An information-theory approach. *Governance* 2002, 15(4), 477 – 501. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0491.00198>
- Halpern, C. (2005) Institutional change through innovation: The URBAN Community Initiative in Berlin, 1994 –99, *Environment and Planning C*, 23, pp. 697 – 713. <https://doi.org/10.1068/c0416>
- De Jong, M.; Mamadouh, V. Two contrasting perspectives on institutional transplantation. In *The Theory and Practice of Institutional Transplantation: Experiences with the Transfer of Policy Institutions*, 2nd ed.; deJong, M., Lalenis, K., Mamdouh, V., Eds.; Publisher: Dordrecht, Kluwer, 2002; pp. 19 – 32. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-011-0001-4\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-011-0001-4_2)

16. Bohme, K.; Richardson, T.; Dabinett, G.; Jensen, O. B. Values in a vacuum? Towards an integrated multi-level analysis of the governance of European space. *European Planning Studies* 2004, 12(8), 1175–1188. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0965431042000289287>
17. Celata, F.; Coletti, R. Place-based strategies or territorial cooperation? Regional development in transnational perspective in Italy. *Local Economy* 2014, 29(4-5), 394–411. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269094214533903>
18. Cappelen, Adne; Castellacci, Fulvio; Fagerberg, Jan; Verspagen, Bart. The Impact of EU Regional Support on Growth and Convergence in the European Union. *Journal of Common Market Studies*. 2003. 41. 621–644. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00438>.
19. Beugelsdijk, M.; Eijffinger, S.C.W. The Effectiveness of Structural Policy in the European Union: An Empirical Analysis for the EU-15 in 1995–2001. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 2005, 43: 37–<https://doi.org/51.10.1111/j.0021-9886.2005.00545.x>
20. Colomb, C. The added value of transnational cooperation: Towards a new framework for evaluating learning and policy change. *Planning Practice & Research* 2007, 22(3), 347–372. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02697450701666712>
21. Othengrafen, Frank; Cornett, A. P. A Critical Assessment of the Added Value of Territorial Cohesion (2013), Refereed article No. 53, October, 2013, *European Journal of Spatial Development*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5139810>
22. Batterbury, S. Principles and purposes of European Union Cohesion Policy evaluation. *Regional Studies* 2006, 40(2), 179 – 188. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343400600600504>
23. Lähtenmäki-Smith, K.; Bohme K. Measuring Policy Learning: Evaluating the Governance Impact of the Structural Funds, Paper presented at the EES Conference on evaluation, ‘Governance, Democracy and Evaluation’, Berlin, 30 September – 2 October 2004
24. Gualini, E. Multi-Level Governance and Institutional Change: The Europeanization of Regional Policy in Italy; Publisher: Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1353294400008802>
25. Bachtler, J.; Wren, C. Evaluation of European Union Cohesion Policy: Research questions and policy challenges. *Regional Studies* 2006, 40(2), 143 – 153.
26. Wasseberg, Birte; Reitel, Bernard; Peyrony, Jean. Territorial Cooperation in Europe. A historical perspective. Publisher: Brussels: Regional and Urban Policy, European Commission, 2015.
27. Murtagh, B.; McKay, S. Evaluating the social effects of the EU URBAN Community Initiative Programme. *European Planning Studies* 2003, 11(2), 193 – 211.
28. Guillermo-Ramirez, M. The Added Value of European Territorial Cooperation. Drawing from Case Studies. In: Medeiros, E. (eds) *European Territorial Cooperation. The Urban Book Series*. Publisher: Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74887-0\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74887-0_3)
29. Phelps, N.; McNeill, D.; Parsons, N. In search of a European edge urban identity: Trans-European networking among edge urban municipalities. *European Urban and Regional Studies* 2002, 9(3), 211 – 224 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0969776402009003>
30. Medeiros E., Scott J., Ferreira R., Boijmans P., Verschelde N., Guillermo-Ramírez M., Gyula O., Peyrony J.; Soares A. European territorial cooperation towards territorial cohesion? *Regional Studies* 2024, 58:8, 1518–1529. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2023.2226698>
31. Ward, S.; Williams, R. From hierarchy to networks? Sub-central government and EU urban environment policy. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 1997, 35(3), 439 – 464. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00069>
32. Marshall, A. Europeanization at the urban level: Local actors, institutions and the dynamics of multi-level interaction. *Journal of European Public Policy* 2005, 12(4), 668–686.
33. GAL Risorsa Lomellina. Orizzonti Rurali: La città riscopre il suo giardino. Cooperazione transnazionale o interterritoriale (PSR 2014-2020, Misura 19.3.01). Relazione conclusiva, Regione Lombardia. 2019.
34. GAL Risorsa Lomellina. Restar-Restare - Documento di Piano. Regione Lombardia. 2016.
35. GAL Lago di Como. Lago di Como SMART: Strategie Multi Attore per una Ruralità espressione dei Territori. Regione Lombardia. 2016.
36. GAL Terre del Po. Piano di Sviluppo Locale GAL Terre del Po - Un piano per un sistema intelligente, un piano per una crescita sostenibile. Regione Lombardia. 2016. Available online:

- [https://www.google.com/search?q=https://www.galterredelpo.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/PSL\\_TerredelPo\\_apr16\\_v1b.pdf](https://www.google.com/search?q=https://www.galterredelpo.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/PSL_TerredelPo_apr16_v1b.pdf) (accessed on 30 April 2024).
37. GAL Carso. Strategia di sviluppo locale del GAL Carso – LAS Kras 2014–2020. Regione Autonoma Friuli Venezia Giulia. 2016.
  38. GAL Sulcis Iglesiente Capoterra e Campidano di Cagliari. Programma di Sviluppo Rurale Sardegna 2014-2020: Scheda di progetto "Memoria e web TV: raccontiamo i territori." Regolamento (CE) 1305/2013, Misura 19.3. 2024.
  39. GAL Sulcis Iglesiente. Programma di Sviluppo Rurale 2014-2020 – Misura 19.2: Piano di Azione Locale. Regione Sardegna. 2016. Available online: [https://www.google.com/search?q=https://www.galsulcisiglesiente.it/sites/default/files/cdp\\_gal\\_sulcis\\_240720.pdf](https://www.google.com/search?q=https://www.galsulcisiglesiente.it/sites/default/files/cdp_gal_sulcis_240720.pdf)
  40. GAL Marmilla. BIO\_NETWORK: Le reti innovative della Marmilla. Piano di Azione Locale, Misura 19.2. Regione Sardegna, Programma di Sviluppo Rurale 2014-2020, Reg. (UE) (CE) 1305/2013. 2016. Available online: <https://old.galmarmilla.it/media/283333/Complemento-al-Piano-di-Azione-Locale-GAL-MARMILLA.pdf>
  41. Grup Acció Local Sud Alacant. Entre Aljibes y Azarbes: Reconexión territorial ante el cambio climático. Estrategia de Desarrollo Local Participativo GAL Sur Alicante 2014-2020. Unión Europea, Fondo Europeo Agrícola de Desarrollo Rural. 2017.
  42. GAL Valli Marecchia e Conca. Strategia di Sviluppo Locale 2014–2020. Programma di Sviluppo Rurale Regione Emilia-Romagna 2014-2020, Misura 19 - Sostegno dello sviluppo locale LEADER. 2016. Available online: [https://www.google.com/search?q=https://www.vallimarecchiaeconca.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/strategia\\_sviluppo\\_locale.pdf](https://www.google.com/search?q=https://www.vallimarecchiaeconca.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/strategia_sviluppo_locale.pdf)
  43. GAL Delta 2000. Strategia di Sviluppo Locale 2014–2020. Programma di Sviluppo Rurale Regione Emilia-Romagna 2014-2020, Misura 19 - Sostegno dello sviluppo locale LEADER. 2016.
  44. GAL Appennino Bolognese. Strategia di Sviluppo Locale 2014–2020. Programma di Sviluppo Rurale Regione Emilia-Romagna 2014-2020, Misura 19 - Sostegno dello sviluppo locale LEADER. 2019
  45. GAL L'Altra Romagna. Strategia di Sviluppo Locale 2014–2020. Imprese/turismo/ambiente - una Smart Land per il 2020. Programma di Sviluppo Rurale Regione Emilia-Romagna 2014-2020, Misura 19 - Sostegno dello sviluppo locale LEADER. 2016. Available online: [https://www.google.com/search?q=https://www.altraromagna.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Allegato-C-strategia\\_DEFINITIVA-AGOSTO-2016.pdf](https://www.google.com/search?q=https://www.altraromagna.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Allegato-C-strategia_DEFINITIVA-AGOSTO-2016.pdf)
  46. GAL Del Ducato. Strategia di Sviluppo Locale 2014–2020. Aggregare per innovare. Programma di Sviluppo Rurale Regione Emilia-Romagna 2014-2020, Misura 19 - Sostegno dello sviluppo locale LEADER. 2016. Available online: [https://www.google.com/search?q=https://galdelducato.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/GALdelDUCATO\\_SSL\\_28Luglio2016.pdf](https://www.google.com/search?q=https://galdelducato.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/GALdelDUCATO_SSL_28Luglio2016.pdf)
  47. G.A.L. Antico Frignano e Appennino Reggiano. Strategia di Sviluppo Locale 2014–2020. Programma di Sviluppo Rurale Regione Emilia-Romagna 2014-2020, Misura 19 - Sostegno dello sviluppo locale LEADER. 2015. Available online: <https://www.galmodenareggio.it/misura-19/>
  48. Gal Alto Bellunese. Scheda di progetto " The Rediscovered Garden, a Transnational project to recover and revitalize traditional agricultural practices. Cooperazione transnazionale o interterritoriale (PSR 2014-2020, Misura 19.3.01). Regione Veneto. 2019.
  49. Gruppo di Azione Locale Alto Bellunese. Programma di sviluppo locale: Coesione, Innovazione, Mestieri ed Economia Alto Bellunesi (CIME Alto Bellunesi). Allegato A approvato dall'Assemblea dei Soci con delibera n. 4 del 18 marzo 2016. Regione Veneto, Programma di Sviluppo Rurale 2014-2020, Reg. (UE) (CE) 1305/2013. 2016. Available online: <https://www.galaltobellunese.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/PSL-CIME.pdf>
  50. Gruppo di Azione Locale Montagna Vicentina. Programma di Sviluppo Locale 2023-2027: Montagna Viva – Insieme per il nostro domani. Allegato A alla deliberazione del Consiglio di Amministrazione del GAL n. 1 del 30.01.2024. Regione Veneto, Programma di Sviluppo Rurale 2014-2020, Reg. (UE) (CE) 1305/2013. 2024. Available online:

[https://www.google.com/search?q=https://www.fodafveneto.it/evento/1288/%25E2%2580%259CMontagna\\_VIVA%3A\\_insieme\\_per\\_il\\_nostro\\_domani%E2%80%9D\\_-\\_Avvio\\_di.html](https://www.google.com/search?q=https://www.fodafveneto.it/evento/1288/%25E2%2580%259CMontagna_VIVA%3A_insieme_per_il_nostro_domani%E2%80%9D_-_Avvio_di.html)

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.