



“The current LEADER management model is running out of steam to cope with today’s enormous challenges. Something needs to change.”

Paul Soto, Director Grupo Alba & former Team leader of FARNET and ENRD CP

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ARCA has recently published a series of interviews for the 30-year anniversary of the LEADER programme. In these interviews, different experts reflect on the distinctive features of the LEADER programme in the European and Spanish context, building on the Catalan example. They discuss how the LEADER programme has evolved over the last 30 years, and how to ensure its good continuity.

Paul Soto is former team leader of the Fisheries Areas Network (FARNET) and of the Contact Point of the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD). In this interview, he expresses his personal views.

How do you remember the origins of the LEADER programme?

I started in 1990 with the first LEADER programme, in the Jerte Valley (Extremadura, Spain). At that time, LEADER was a pilot, experimental programme. Michelle Laine from the European Commission, who was known as the father of LEADER at the time, described it as a short circuit to the traditional management system. The aim was to create a direct connection between the Commission at European level and local people, which was a huge change in mentality.

We worked for almost a year speaking with the 11 villages in the Jerte Valley, preparing a strategy. In that area, there was no rural tourism, there were no local products, the cherry cooperatives sold everything on the national market, and there was no exporting. LEADER supported a transition. A rural tourism sector was created, many local product companies were created, and it was possible to structure a market

for cherries, the flagship product of the valley, which obtained a designation of origin and was able to be exported. The issue is that that phase is over, that transition has been made, and now the situation is not the same.

How has the LEADER programme evolved?

LEADER was a major breakthrough, a fundamental change in the way things were done. It was lucky too, because at that time, there was an interest in rural tourism, in local products, Spain had many untapped natural resources, and there was an opportunity that could be filled. Therefore, LEADER filled that gap and helped the local population to benefit from those changes. However, it began to suffer from its own success. When we started in 1991, there were 200 groups, in the next phase it expanded to almost 1 000, and in the next phase of mainstreaming the number of groups doubled. That doubling meant extending into areas where there was not such a strong tradition of organisation, and becoming institutionalised because there was a lot more money. Above all, in 2007, LEADER, instead of being a programme directly managed by Europe, started to be an axis and then a measure within the rural development programmes.

The idea and our dream were that the bottom-up

LEADER methodology would extend into the other rural development measures, but what happened was the opposite. The management systems of the other measures of the normal regulations started to be applied in the management of LEADER, and the number of controls and bureaucracy increased exponentially. The administrative culture does not fit with the flexibility needed to address the problems and challenges that we have now. The current management model is running out of steam, and at the same time, we have different and enormous challenges. Something needs to change.

What role have the Rural Development Networks played in the advancement of the LEADER programme?

I worked in the first European LEADER Observatory. It was the beginning of the networks, and I think that it played a fundamental role in creating links between people, in mutual learning. It was a beautiful moment because you could see how the Swedes, Finns, French, Italians, etc., were doing it. And you managed to capitalise, learn and formalise many lessons that are now LEADER's common background. This was a very innovative period and much of what was created at the time has been used. The language has changed, but many of the fundamentals were created in this phase.

I believe the voluntary networks, associations at the European level, ELARD, or in Spain the REDR or ARCA in Catalonia play a fundamental role in various types of representation and capacity building. For me, the most important thing is to capitalise on what is learnt at the local level, because the learning generated at the local level cannot be replaced by anything else. In my view, what ARCA is doing, starting with strategic cooperation on a series of future issues, and now using that experience to create links and participation at the local level with a Catalan Rural Agenda, is the role of networks. You are making proposals for the future. You are taking the debate to another level. And I hope that this does not remain just a debate but that it turns into action.

What are the distinctive features that the LEADER programme brings to rural development?

If you look at the introduction to the Common Provision Regulation of the current period it says that LEADER has three fundamental objectives; capacity building among the population, innovation, and structural

change. That is what we have tried to do since 1990, and we succeeded in certain areas. But now there are additional challenges, such as climate change, energy transition, digital transition, the need for resilience after Covid, and urban-rural linkages. All these fields and more are huge, very complex areas, which local people cannot be expected to solve all these problems alone. But local people are absolutely necessary for these changes to take place.

The thing is that all these changes go beyond what LEADER has normally done. LEADER used to work supporting rural tourism micro-projects, local products, small businesses, small local actions, opening calls for proposals, providing training. All this is very good and some of it will be necessary in the future. But it is not enough now. LEADER is the possible bridge that can offer the population the tools to participate in the transition that will come. And if they don't have those tools there is a huge risk that the same people who lost before will lose again. Transitions can be made in many ways that may or may not be beneficial for the rural world. That for me is the fundamental role for LEADER.

What would you propose for the good continuity of the LEADER programme?

Until recently, the main role of LEADER has been as a one-stop shop to support small-scale productive, public, civil, etc., activities. But I believe that bureaucracy has now made this role so complicated. If the situation does not change, it will not stand the test of time. In many parts of Europe, I already see the civilian population moving faster than LEADER can respond. The calls and the bureaucracy and everything that goes with participating in LEADER are so big that participation has become too complex. It was not like that before, but it is now. There has to be a major simplification by using simplified costs and a much more agile, much simpler management regulation. A regulation made for the citizens. I believe that this is what you must do in Catalonia, you can be leaders.

Secondly, LEADER acts as a citizens' platform, uniting the public, private and civil sectors to provide tools, knowledge, dynamism and technical support for collective projects, pilot projects, working on the energy, urban-rural, digital, etc. transition. I think that what you have started to do in Catalonia with strategic projects and cooperation follows this idea. For me, this is the future.



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