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FROM GOOD-WILL TO GOOD-USE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE LEADER EVALUATION

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Abstract

For the first time in the 25 years of the history of LEADER, Local Action Groups implementing this programme have been called upon to undertake the evaluation exercise at the level of their Community-Led Local Development strategies - Article 33, point 1(f) of Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013. While the EU Regulation does not specify how to respond to this requirement, there is an extensive body of literature illustrating methods, guidelines, methodologies, studies, and recommendations with regard to how to evaluate the LEADER programme at the LAG level. Despite the good will of evaluation experts or alike to contribute to the evaluation of LEADER, the literature still has considerable gaps in relation to the final utilization of these propositions. In particular, the prevailing attitude of evaluation experts, is to overlook the importance of direct collaboration (from Latin: *working together*) with local stakeholders throughout the design and implementation of the LEADER evaluation. In addition, the current literature seems to separate the methodological discussions from the complex and interactive arena in which the evaluation of LEADER unfolds (e.g. political pressure on the future of LEADER, strong penetration of IT solutions in the Monitoring & Evaluation business, and conventional views about rural management). In this thesis, utilization refers to the responsiveness of the evaluation to the multiple situations and intentions of stakeholders in the multi-level governance structure, and in particular, at the LAG level. Based on the utilization-focused approach of Michael Quinn Patton (2008), this applied qualitative research endeavours to provide both theoretical and practical elements to reflect on the design, implementation and use of the evaluation of LEADER at the LAG level. It extends the good will of the evaluation approaches based primarily on the conceptual analysis of the programme, with the good use (or *situational responsiveness*) expressed through the interviews of 13 LAG managers across different EU areas. The results show the diversity in terms of intentions and situations varying across different LAGs in the EU, which adds new elements to the complexity of the LEADER evaluation. The complexity of LEADER evaluations stems from the mutual interplay between different domains (the organizational features of the LAG, the Community, the Local Development Strategy, and the larger LEADER system) and contextual forces. This suggests that, to turn the good will into good use, the LEADER evaluators should become facilitators. Facilitation, here is defined as the intermediation among different interconnected parts of the same system, making it necessary not only for guiding the LAGs to respond systematically to complexity, but also for supporting the negotiation and collaboration among different stakeholders concerning decisions about the evaluation criteria, values, purposes, methods, and process uses. Finally, this thesis concludes by raising two research questions to understand and address the utilization of the LEADER evaluation at the LAG level.

Key words: *Evaluation, LEADER, Utilization, Responsiveness, Complexity*

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Table of contents

List of Figures

List of Table

List of Abbreviation

CLLD	Community Led Local Development
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
EFRD	European Fund for Regional Development
EMFF	European Maritime and Fisheries Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
LAG	Local Action Group
LDS	Local Development Strategy
LEADER	Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale
MLG	Multi Level Governance
RDP	Rural Development Programme
ToC	Theory of Change

There was nothing more challenging
and sentimentally difficult during this thesis
than typing the terms
"Rural" or "Local" Development.
More difficult than discovering and building relations
among different EU places and communities.

This map presents the 2362 selected Local Action Groups co-funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development under the 2007-2013 Rural Development Programmes. Retrieved on 07 August 2016 from: http://bookshop.europa

After all this journey,
there is nothing more important than
being aware that one day,
not really remote from yesterday,
this Master thesis on the "Evaluation of Rural Development"
was itself one social construction of modernity and the audit society.

1. Introduction

In the coming 2017, the LEADER programme (*Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale*) is going to have its 26th Anniversary after its first launch in 1991 as a European Union (EU) initiative to support the bottom-up, local development of EU rural areas. The LEADER programme is a specific measure of the EU Rural Development Policy (RDP). In the current programming period 2014-2020, the LEADER programme is placed within the framework of the EU Cohesion Policy, in coordination with other European Structural and Investment Funds (ESF, ERDF, EMFF), and implemented at the local level through Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) strategies (based on a multi-fund approach), or as it was used to define the strategies based on the mono-fund approach (EAFRD), through Local Development Strategies (LDSs).

For the first time in the history of LEADER, the EU's legislation requires that the Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) implementing the LEADER programmes at the local level, through so-called "Local Action Groups" (LAGs), shall endeavour to provide the information and descriptions of the monitoring and evaluation arrangements at local level, in order to evaluate the LEADER programme[1] at the EU level. However, besides the request of the European Commission (DG AGRI) for National and Regional authorities to collect a common set of context, result, and output indicators to facilitate the evaluation of the LEADER programme within the RDP[2], the wider EU legislation does not specify "how" the LAGs should respond to this request. The recurrent challenge is to design and conduct approaches for the evaluation of LEADER at the local level by keeping them in line with the request and intentions of the upper stakeholders embedded into the multi-level governance of the programme: regional, national, European level (Saraceno, 1999).

Different organizations are trying to contribute to this issue: national and European Rural Networks, evaluation experts, LEADER associations, scientists from academia or private research institutes, and evaluation practitioners. Several academic studies, applications of evaluation methods, and governmental guidelines are already in existence in this field. However, these studies only provide a "suggestion" of how LAGs should evaluate the LEADER programme at the local level, for which purposes, with which methods, criteria, values, and for which topics or unit of analysis they should be evaluated. Despite the proliferation of methodological solutions, technical proposals, critics, and requirements recommended to LAGs, the literature still presents a substantial gap with regard to how the stakeholders at the LAG level intend to use the LEADER evaluation, and how the design and implementation of the evaluation approach could be made more responsive and useful to the specific situation and circumstances at the LAG level.

[1] Article 33 of the Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and Council of 17 December 2013 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund; and Article 71 of Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and Council of 17 December 2013 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)

[2] Annex IV to the Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014 of July 2014 laying down rules for the application of Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 of the EU Parliament and of the Council.

This thesis presents an applied qualitative research, which endeavours to make a meaningful contribution to filling this gap in the literature, paving the way for a more face-to-face collaborative approach between the community of evaluation "experts" and the stakeholders at the LAG level. This thesis attempts to draw out both theoretical and pragmatic elements in order to facilitate the design of a more utilization-focused approach, which have been based on an extensive literature review and 13 semi-structured interviews with the managers of LAGs from nine different EU Member States. This thesis follows the epistemological research line of Rogers (2009) and Patton (2008), to attempt to make the LEADER evaluation more utilization-focused and responsive to the situations of the LAGs. The design of the evaluation approach should match with the specific features and principles underlying the nature of the programme, as well as with the pragmatic intentions and circumstances in which the stakeholders at the LAG level will conduct and use the evaluation. Following this assertion, this thesis is structured in the following way.

Chapter 2 reviews the state of the art concerning the evaluation of the LEADER programme, and Chapter 3 problematizes the lack of references in the literature regarding the role of facilitators covered by the scholars, policy-makers, and evaluation experts to collaborate (from the Latin "*collaborare*", "*com-*" = with + "*laborare*" = to work) with the LAGs, from the first stages, on the subject of the design, implementation, and use of the LEADER evaluation. In order to go beyond the good will of the literature about the evaluation of LEADER, Chapter 4 defines the aim and objectives of this thesis, which is targeted at complementing the theoretical aspects with the inquiry of the pragmatic situations and intentions at the LAG level. Chapter 5 describes the theoretical principles employed, the research methods, and overall limits of this work. Chapter 6 displays the conceptual analysis of the LEADER programme and Chapter 7 reports on the main pragmatic elements to consider for the LEADER evaluation. Since the intentions and situations at the LAG level are joined together, chapter 7 exposes them together directly through the words of the managers, and displays them over four basic elements of every evaluation approach (Dahler-Larsen, 2011): 1.) the evaluation purposes (why?) 2.) the evaluation methods and process (how?) 3.) the evaluation criteria and values (which? what?) and 4.) the evaluation focus or topics (about what?). Chapter 8 discusses the main findings of the research, and finally the thesis concludes with Chapter 9, which distils relevant and important conclusions.

The overall conclusions emphasize the complexity of the LEADER programme, due to its multi-dimensional and multi-level governance approach, its inherent orientation towards innovation and community development, and the highly dynamic, changing, and uncertain global arena in which it occurs. Theoretically, classic evaluation approaches based on linear thinking or rigid requirements would mismatch with the complex nature of LEADER, and might reduce the complexity accompanying its evaluation to a mere symbolic and accountability exercise. Therefore, different evaluation tools and purposes should be recommended, which embrace pluralism, system thinking, and complexity theory. However, the analysis of the situations and intentions unfolding at the LAG level have challenged the assumptions of these theory-driven proposals. Accountability and other classic programme evaluation approach should not be discarded *a priori*, but their utility should be reconsidered in light of its complex interdependence with different institutional domains of actions and practices (Figure 7), for example: traditional thinking of the rural management in some LAGs, political pressures to which LAGs are exposed to from within the community and outside the LEADER programme, or the advancements and penetration of new Information and Technology

solutions into the Monitoring and Evaluation business. Several elements to design and implement utilization-focused approaches to evaluate LEADER have emerged (Table 4), and suggested that the social construction of their utilization should be searched into the specific arena of interaction between: 1.) the organizational features of the LAG; 2.) the tangible and intangible characteristics of the Local Development Strategy; 3.) the situations and conditions unfolding in the community and place; and 4.) the political-policy discourses and dynamics occurring within the LEADER system (Figure 7). This suggests that the good will or responsiveness of the evaluation proposals offered by the current literature (Chapter 2) should be re-considered and re-positioned within this dynamic institutional framework, and invite the scholars and "experts" to understand how certain evaluation practices, proposals, or values emerge in response to these mutually-shaping institutional domains. Moreover, if the utilization of the LEADER evaluation is fragmented into the multiple intentions and situations unfolding in this dynamic institutional arena, this thesis argues that *Evaluators should become Facilitators*. The evaluators of LEADER are not only called to answer methodological challenges in isolation by other contextual forces and conditions (e.g. power relations among the LAGs and their regional or national Managing Authorities; conflicts and competitive relations among the LAGs belonging the same governmental region/nation; lack of pro-activeness of certain gender groups in the community, etc.). In order to stretch out the good will into good use, evaluators are called to more collaborative field-work and action-oriented research, to enlarge the opportunities, tools, and uses of the LEADER evaluation, and facilitate the LAGs in thinking more institutionally conscious, and in deciding systematically about how the evaluation could to respond to this complex arena. Some suggestions are offered in Chapter 8. Finally, this thesis concludes by raising some research questions, which could be tackled in the future in order to further the literature and to contribute to the good use of the LEADER evaluation.

2. From "good will" to "good use" of the LEADER evaluation

There is an extensive body of literature about the evaluation of LEADER. The material written in the languages accessible to the researcher (English and Italian) can be systematized in two main parts: the body of literature on evaluating the LEADER programme, and the body of literature focused predominantly on the *evaluation* of the LEADER programme from a more technical methodological perspective, which focuses on the documents concerning the application of methods, existing practices, evaluation guidelines, legislative documents, and the LEADER evaluation's problems, limits, and solutions. Clearly, the first body of literature also focuses on the evaluation itself, in terms of the methodologies used to assess the programmes, but this issue is not addressed as a primary focus as is the case in the second grouping of literature. This section reviews the literature concerning the LEADER evaluation as a topic in and of itself. The material regarding the evaluation of LEADER is long and extensive, with historical roots from the first launch of the initiative (1991) until the current introduction of LEADER in the CLLD framework (2014-2020). The literature will not be presented as a chronological catalogue, but instead, systematized as follows:

1. Legislative documents (European Commission - DG AGRI, 2014a; 2015; European Parliament & Council, 2013);
2. Evaluation and self-assessment guidelines produced by governmental authorities for the LEADER implementing bodies (EENRD, 2010; European Commission, 2002; Keränen, 2003; Thirion, 2000; Vehmasto, et al., 2004);

3. The grey literature documenting LEADER evaluation experiences on web-sites, social networks, local newspapers, and conferences;
4. and finally a long collection of academic and research studies, which can be divided into three primary groupings:

4.1. ***Empirical applications of LEADER evaluation approache***s:

4.1.1. empowerment evaluation in LEADER (Díaz-Puente, et al. 2008; Díaz-Puente, 2009);

4.1.2. self-assessment of the LAGs (Birolo, 2013; Schiller, 2010);

4.1.3. participatory policy evaluation (Böcher, 2004);

4.1.4. quantitative impact assessment of LEADER, e.g.:

4.1.4.1. the Relative Index of Social Capital Promotion to measure the potential social capital that could be promoted by the LEADER approach (Pisani & Franceschetti, 2011);

4.1.4.2. the integrated multi-criteria methodology based on the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) and the fuzzy-TOPSIS to measure the performance of LAGs in terms of "Good Governance" (Romeo & Marcianò, 2014);

4.1.4.3. the Contingent Valuation Approach to evaluate the social impact of LEADER (Calatrava-Requena, 2011).

4.2. ***Empirical applications of LEADER evaluation methods and indicators***:

4.2.1. Multi-Criteria Decision Analysis (Marquardt & Pappalardo, 2014) and Social Network Analysis to assess the contribution of LEADER to the creation of social capital (Cristini, et al., 2013; Lopolito, et al., 2015; Marquardt & Pappalardo, 2014; Marquardt, et al., 2012; Nardone, et al. 2010; Pisani & Burighel, 2014a);

4.2.2. A set of indicators for monitoring the trust dimension of the LAG (Pisani, et al. 2014b)

4.2.3. Social Network Analysis to evaluate the LEADER implementation process (Marquardt & Möllers, 2010);

4.2.4. Data Envelopment Analysis to measure the LAGs performance in terms of efficiency (Antonio Lopolito, Giannoccaro, & Prosperi, 2011);

4.2.5. the Rural-Sensitive Evaluation Model to evaluate the sensitivity of Local Action Groups to rural issues (Win, et al., 2011);

4.2.6. the intra-LAG self-assessment (ENRD, 2012).

4.3. ***Critical analysis of the LEADER evaluation system as whole*** (i.e. its purposes, structure, procedure, utility, etc.), in regard to:

4.3.1. the lack of responsiveness and context-specificity vis-a-vis the standard and conventional nature of the EU's evaluation of Rural Development Programmes, and in extension, for LEADER (Dax, et al., 2014);

4.3.2. the tensions existing between the managerial and bureaucratic nature of LEADER and the use of participative forms of evaluation (Ray, 2000);

4.3.3. the mainstreaming of canonical evaluation procedures in EU rural programmes, and the orientation of the local evaluation of LAGs to the needs of the central authorities for defending the LEADER approach in Brussels (High & Nemes, 2006);

4.3.4. the tensions, difficulties, and potential to undertake changes in the policy agenda following the evidence-based approach of the evaluation of EU Integrated Rural Development Programmes, such as LEADER (Bristow,et al., 2001);

4.3.5. the negative perceptions of stakeholders about the use of the LEADER evaluation findings, e.g. useful only for the European Commission or useful only when recommendations are clearly addressed to specific actors and within a specific time interval; the LEADER evaluation process, i.e. the process is imposed and mandatory, fitting only the EU structure; and the interface between self-assessment and evaluation (Schiller, 2010);

4.3.6. the limits of the centralized and exogenous evaluation approaches required by the governmental authorities for fostering social learning at the LAG level, and the rising need to find solutions for integrating and reconciling exogenous with endogenous (i.e. designed according to the local needs) approaches into a form of hybrid evaluation (High & Nemes, 2007);

4.3.7. the lack of effective evaluation and policy learning in LEADER evaluation due to the scarce collaboration between the actors involved in the different levels of governance, and insufficient institutional support given by authorities for alternative forms of evaluation (e.g. self-evaluation) to foster policy and social learning rather than pursuing predominantly the key purposes of legitimizing public spending (Nemes, et al. 2014).

In this large grouping of literature concerning the evaluation of LEADER, further differences exist and concern the programming period of reference (LEADER I, LEADER II, LEADER+, LEADER 2007-2013, and LEADER/CLLD 2014-2020), the institutional level of reference (local, regional, national, EU), the kind of approach (quantitative, qualitative, mixed) and purposes of the studies (e.g. to propose a methodology targeting a specific evaluation demand, or to investigate on alternative options to an existing evaluation purpose; to fill some academic gaps or to identify some weaknesses, challenges, and solutions about the current LEADER evaluation).

Despite the differences, there is one fundamental issue, which binds this body of literature together, which in the context of this thesis is commonly referred to as the "good will". The term "good will" refers to the concern regarding the lack of direct involvement of the *primary intended users* reported in the literature, despite its vastness. Direct involvement refers to the collaboration of evaluation experts with the *primary intended users* (later will be described), and distinguish itself from a simple consultative or informative-based relation. Working on a pre-arranged and pre-defined set of elements (e.g. the goals or the procedures of the study), the good will refers especially to the lack of collaboration established between these authors (here defined "evaluation experts") and the local stakeholders in defining the essential elements of the LEADER approach: the goals, the methods, the criteria and values, the topics, and finally its intended uses. For example, capturing the added value of the LEADER approach is assumed to be an interesting and legitimate topic for the focus of the evaluation at LAG level (EENRD, 2010). The implementation of a computer-based social network analysis is conceived to be another appropriate method for the evaluation of LEADER (Lopolito, et al., 2011; Pisani & Franceschetti, 2011). However, the main question underpinning the rationale of this thesis is to what extend is the good will of these LEADER evaluation proposals appropriate or responsive to the real situations and intentions of the LAGs implementing the LEADER?

The focus on the LAG is a crucial element of this qualitative research. In this thesis, the primary intended users are not only limited to the European Commission, the Funders, the National and Regional authorities, or the group of evaluation experts in the LEADER community (evaluation experts, researchers, professors, evaluation business services, etc.), but looks to consider also the LAGs as *primary intended users* of the LEADER evaluation. At the same level of importance and legitimacy of the previously stated actors, there are also the people working in (managers, chairman, board members, partners affiliated, staff) or together with (indirect beneficiaries of the community, students, volunteers, other stakeholders) the LAGs responsible for implementing LEADER at the local level, and these groups should further be duly considered.

This thesis takes the position that in community programmes led by "community organizations" such as LAGs (Cousins & Earl, 1992; Papineau & Kiely, 1996), the primary intended users (those who finally implement, and are targeted by the programme) should play a fundamental role in the design and use of the evaluation. Therefore, any advocacy, proposal, requirement, methodological critics, or contestation about the features of the LEADER evaluation is expected to be responsive to the intentions and situations of specific intended users, without forgetting the LAGs and the communities themselves. As suggested by the utilization-focused approach of Patton (2008), the evaluation enterprise should be judged by the real people implementing and using the evaluation, and the role of the evaluator experts is to facilitate the design of the evaluation with careful consideration of its final utilization.

Under this premise, all the solutions, methods, problems, criticisms, suggestions, requirements, and legislative acts that have been denoted above, fall into the catalogue of the "good will" of scientists and policy-makers primarily because nothing is substantially described or mentioned about the direct and collaborative involvement of the primary intended users (the LAG and the community) in setting up, conducting, and using their proposals or requests (purpose, methods, focus, etc.). Collaboration does not simply mean to involve the intended users to answer to the author's needs or questions (consultation), nor does it mean only inform them about the structure of the study, research, or the legislative requirements. In this thesis, collaboration means to integrate the local stakeholders into the whole evaluation and research process. Collaborative involvement means deciding together, and providing LAGs with the opportunity to negotiate their suggestions, state their needs, situations, and intentions and be extensively integrated and incorporated into the whole working and legislative process carried out about the LEADER evaluation (Cousins, 2001; Fetterman, et al., 2013; Gregory, 2000; Patton, 2011).

It is referred to as "good will" because, to a large extent, the authors of this literature take a paternalistic and normative stand for the LEADER evaluation. For example, when talking about fostering social learning through the LEADER evaluation (High & Nemes, 2007), authors talk on behalf of the LAGs, proposing to them that evaluation should be participatory, but without showing a reference about how they have, or they would eventually involve actively the LAGs in understanding why and how is it useful to design and conduct what they have proposed (High & Nemes, 2006; Ray, 2000). Is participatory always the appropriate method suitable to the situation and intentions of the LAG? Is the community really interested into learning through the LEADER, and in which occasion should it occur? What is the relevance of a computer-based Social Network Analysis

for the operations of the LAG managers? How does a Data Envelopment Analysis contribute to the specific organizational capacity and procedure of the LAG?

Moreover, when LAGs are involved along the evaluation or research process, references are made to the LAGs in either supporting the author's critical analysis (Nemes et al., 2014; Schiller, 2010), or for the procedural application of certain evaluation methods (see the points 4 in listed above). The literature seems to assign a passive role, e.g. of data provider, the mean to conduct some interviews with the local stakeholder, or for some sophisticated and computer-based method. Within the literature about the LEADER evaluation, the LAG seem to a sort of experimental laboratory, a sort of patient through which the "expert" will diagnose the problems in the LEADER evaluation, or make methodological experiments in order to develop new evaluation proposals and solutions. Eventually, these proposals will be adopted and implemented by the LAGs. No reference is found on the role of these authors as a facilitator to stimulate and coordinate the LAGs and the local community in taking a more pro-active stand, to reflect jointly about their evaluation needs and intentions; to identify the bottlenecks hindering the evaluation process and the uses of evaluation findings; the capacities and resources available; to negotiate the needs, purposes, and criteria with other intended users of the evaluation; or to select appropriate and relevant evaluation methods and topics.

"Good will" differs from the "good use" of this literature in terms of responsiveness, which means adapting the evaluation to the dynamic and complex situations of LEADER, at any level (local, regional, national, EU). Following the suggestion of Patton (2008), in order to be responsive to the situation, evaluation experts should not only work to understand the LEADER programme, and consequently propose evaluation approaches (or offer critiques thereof), on the basis of what is more appropriate to the philosophy of the programme (theory of change, kind of approach uses, scale of impacts). A different yardstick is necessary, for responsiveness reasons. In fact, understanding the nature of the LEADER programme is an important step for designing evaluation approaches, proposing new methods, setting up the legislative requirements, or to ground the critiques regarding the aspects of the evaluation (Rogers, 2009; Weiss, 1998). However, this is not enough; to truly turn the good will into the good use of evaluation the of LEADER means that the design process of the literature mentioned above (guidelines, critical reviews, methods) should be closer and integrated to the intricate and multidimensional reality at LAG level.

The literature shows that this is not something new or impossible. In other experiences of community development programmes outside of the European Union, researchers have implemented, documented, and suggested the direct and collaborative involvement of stakeholders throughout the design of the programme's evaluation with the goal of better meeting their needs, empowering the intended users in designing and implementing the evaluation, and finally fostering the final utilization of the evaluation itself (Papineau & Kiely, 1996). Following this review of the literature and the proposals given, the next two Chapter (3 and 4) set the boundaries of the problem to be tackled in this work, and the main objectives to be achieved.

3. Problem statement

The abundant literature dedicated on the approach to evaluate LEADER shows that its design and use has been debated and addressed in several angles and from different perspective (academia, governmental authority, practitioners). Some authors have proposed specific methods to fulfil the evaluation purposes of accountability, transparency and the improvement of the programme performance as defined by the governmental authorities (European Commission, 2015; EU Reg. No 1698/2005). Other authors, instead, have criticized exactly those same purposes requested by governmental authorities, and asked for the setting up of more learning-oriented evaluation approach for LEADER (High & Nemes, 2007). In addition to the discussion about which purposes should the evaluation of LEADER pursues, there are further elements which have been deeply discussed in the above mentioned literature, but are still open to debate among experts and scientists, as for example in regard to how (evaluation methods), who (self-assessment or external evaluator), on which focus (e.g. added value, impact, results, single projects) and with which criteria and values should be conducted the evaluation. In the miscellaneous and jumbled set of studies, legislative requirements, methods, critics, solutions, and open issues available in the current literature, there are two problems which this thesis aims to tackle.

The first problem concerns how to decide about which methods, purposes, criteria, or values are more appropriate for the evaluation of LEADER. This concerns on how to agree on whether, for example, the participatory or self-assessment can be retained more appropriate and better than a classical impact assessment or an external evaluation. Which criteria should the researchers or evaluation decision makers take into account when deliberating, writing, negotiating, and proposing something about the design of the LEADER evaluation? Is the recurrent "added value" of the LEADER programme the right topic to focus on? What about rather focusing on the "internal capacity" of the LAGs or the "sustainability" of the LAGs as development agencies outside the LEADER programme? Is not better to evaluate how the LEADER approach is adopted in the community rather than what it tries to achieve? All these open questions could proliferate thousands of scientific papers, evaluation guidelines, and conferences about the LEADER evaluation. Every proposal, position and perspective sounds interesting, convincing, appropriate, valid, and right within its own theoretical boundary, social construction, and scope. But if different stakeholders have different worldviews, stakes, theoretical approach and so on, how could be possible to elevate each single contributions to a collective decision making process that improve the LEADER evaluation? In order to create a common ground across all these positions, and to guide through simple and practical principles the discussion among the multiple stakeholders of the LEADER evaluation, this thesis adopts the utilization-focused approach of Michael Quinn Patton (2008). This theory will be further explained in Chapter 5.2, and its selection has been taken to offer a good pragmatic and basic point to address one's step forward the discussion about the design of the LEADER evaluation. Being utilization-focused means to make decision along the process of evaluation according to its final intended uses. Therefore, by keeping the discussion focused on the final utilization, this work tries to review the utility and relevance of existing literature, and to lay the foundations for building the future studies and works related to the LEADER evaluation, and its utilization.

The following implicit question arising from the utilization-focused approach is: who should decide and talk over what is useful and relevant, or differently, who should be excluded along the

design and use of the LEADER evaluation process? These questions introduce the second problem addressed by this thesis, which is about turning the good will in the good use of the LEADER evaluation. In the previous chapter, the "good will" has been explained as the lack of a mutual collaboration between the evaluation "experts" and the LAGs and its surrounding community along the design of the LEADER evaluation, or even the empowerment thereof. The good use does not exclude the good will, but it complements it. The good will is not to say that all the literature omitting the collaboration with the LAG is useless or paperwork to leave on the shelf. However, the main problem of the good will stand in the lack of studies or references questioning, assessing, or showing their level of responsiveness or appropriateness compared with the intentions and situations of the final intended users (e.g. the LAGs and its stakeholders).

According to the utilization focused approach, decisions about the LEADER evaluation should be taken and judged by the people in the real world, those who conduct and use the evaluation exercise (Patton, 2008). Of course, there are different ways to draw a line between who are and who are not the real people using the evaluation, as well as who should be considered as primary intended users. For example, Saraceno (2010), in her article about "*The evaluation of the Local Policy Making in Europe. Learning from the LEADER community initiatives*" argues that:

> *"the problems … for a good evaluation … should be discussed within the community of evaluators and some consensus should be achieved on the alternative evaluation methods that might be used. The conclusions … should be developed further and should become a standard evaluation practice for programmes adopting this approach* (referring to LEADER). **Continuing***: "this implies a double purpose for their evaluation: in the first place, to respond to the accountability requirements in the use of public funding; in the second place, to better understand the factor influencing local development in different areas, in order to provide feedback to the "top" levels and thus to increase the effectiveness of future policy making"*

Differently from Saraceno, it could be argued that the list of primary intended users to involve along the design, conduction, and use of the LEADER evaluation approach could be legitimately extended beyond the horizon of the "community of evaluators" and the top levels in the policy governance. At least, this premise is the case of many other community development programmes outside the EU (Estrella, 2010; Papineau & Kiely, 1996). Indeed, in the context of the LEADER evaluation, it could be reasonable to involve the LAGs for enlarging the evaluation beyond the methodological discussion. Collaborative evaluation and research practices could open the windows to facilitation and adaptation, and accommodate the LAGs to expressing their intentions about the fundamental purposes of the LEADER evaluation, the essential criteria and values, as well as the process and methods they intend to employ considering their organizational and socio-economic conditions. The LAG themselves, indeed, could also bring up their own intentions about what is useful to be pursued, and through which meaningful and beneficial path they would intend to proceed.

In order to falling out of the "good will" of the "community of evaluators" who (according Saraceno) should seek for a consensus among themselves, and possibly fulfil the needs of the "top" levels who take care of the future of the policy, this thesis stands for a more neutral and democratic approach. Following the suggestions of Patton (2008), this thesis does not advocate for any wilful

and purposeful method, purpose, criteria, and values for the LEADER evaluation, but it advocates for facilitating the decisions about its evaluation approach through the negotiation and alignment of the "*intended uses by the intended users*". As High and Nemes (2007) suggest, to improve the quality of the LEADER evaluation, alignment and integration should be found across the different institutional frames, interests, and needs of the multiple stakeholders embedded into the levels of the LEADER programme. Since there is a gap in the literature about how do intended users at LAG level (managers, board, partners, beneficiaries, community, etc.) intend to use the LEADER evaluation, or how these intentions differ, overlap, or are in relation to other situational factors, this thesis tries to contribute to the design of the LEADER evaluation approaches which are utilization-focused and responsive to both theoretical and pragmatic elements. In the following section, the aim, the objectives, and the research questions are further defined in detail.

4. Aim, objective, and research questions

The overall aim pursued by this analysis is to provide novel observations and insights in order to not only fill the gaps in the literature and understanding of LAGs working at the ground level, but also to inform and support the design and implementation of a more utilization-focused and responsive approach for the evaluation of LEADER. This study neither aims to produce a new methodology, nor aims to conclude about which specific approach should be pursued for the evaluation of LEADER. Rather, this thesis offers a critical and in-depth view of the conceptual elements concerning the theory of change of LEADER, and of the pragmatic intentions and situations of the LAGs that should be taken into account when designing utilization-focused approaches to LEADER evaluation. Therefore, the main research question guiding this thesis is:

RQ: Following a utilization-focused approach, which theoretical and practical elements should be considered for the design of LEADER/CLLD evaluation?

As will be argued more extensively in Chapter 4, the utilization-focused approach serves to guide decisions about evaluation by trying to go far beyond the good will or rational of theoretical-grounded methodological and policy arguments. Therefore, this work starts by grounding the design of the evaluation approach on a critical analysis of the conceptual elements characterizing the features of LEADER (e.g. theory of change, activities, goals). After, the conceptual elements drawn from this analysis are complemented and confronted with the practical situations and intentions described by the managers of the LAG who will ultimately conduct and use the evaluation.

The situational analysis tries to develop decisions and arguments about the LEADER evaluation which are more responsive and accommodating to the pragmatic and contingent circumstances, needs, values, and resources influencing the evaluation use of intended users (*situational responsiveness*). In this work, the intended users analysed are the LAGs, which have been assessed through the use of interviews with their managers. While the collection of qualitative data from other possible users would have made this analysis more complete, several reasons (described in Chapter 5.3) have led to the omission of the following LEADER evaluation stakeholders:

1. The Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development of the European Commission, and its delegated bodies (e.g. ENRD – Contact Point, ENRD – Evaluation Helpdesk, EIP – Service Point);
2. The Directorate General of the European Commission involved in the LEADER/CLLD programme (DG MARE, EMPLOI; DG REGIO);
3. The Funders (Paying Agency; authorities from the National/Regional Funds);
4. The EU's governmental bodies (EU Parliament, Committees, Court of Auditor);
5. National and Regional governmental bodies (Managing Authorities, National Rural Networks);
6. European, National, and Regional non-governmental bodies related to LEADER (ELARD, LEADER association for regional lobby, LAG-led networks);
7. Other members of the LAG, e.g. affiliated actors (NGOs, private entrepreneurs, associations), the staff, the board, the chairman or chairwoman, etc.;
8. Citizens (non-beneficiaries or indirect beneficiaries of the community covered by the LEADER programme);
9. Academia and other evaluator practitioners dedicated on the LEADER (researchers, students, evaluation experts, etc.)

Following the main research question, this study is articulated in two parts: one theoretical, and the other more empirical/evaluative. Rogers (2009) and Patton (2008) suggest to follow this kind of interplay between theory and practice to design responsive and utilization-focused approach to evaluation. Therefore, chapter 6 is all about the conceptual analysis of the LEADER programme, and aims at identifying and understanding the underlying elements constituting the LEADER programme. Secondarily, chapter 7 explores and analyse the logic and the pragmatic intentions of 13 LAG managers from nine different EU Member States in regard to the use of the LEADER evaluation in the context of their LAG. Moreover, this second part aims to scrutinize the situations of the LAGs underlying the intentions of the managers, hence to increase the situational responsiveness of the LEADER evaluation approach.

The overall hypothesis underpinning this thesis is that the intentions about the use of the LEADER evaluation vary across the LAGs and their specific situations, thus undermining the presumed and general utility of universal and theory-driven evaluation approaches, guidelines, or technical-methodological solutions that are self-centred on the good will of evaluation experts or decision makers, but less responsive or adaptive to the pragmatic situations of the intended users at local level. In order to scrutinize how intentions and situation varies across LAGs, rather than analysing in-depth the situation and intention of one single LAG, this work aims to uncover, compare, and analyse the diversity of situations and intentions manifested in LAG from different EU geographical areas. Semi-structured interviews are used in this study to analyse the underlying factors (e.g. political, sociological, economic, managerial) interacting with the intentions of the managers. The methodological aspects are displayed more in detail in Chapter 4. To summarise in brief, this thesis endeavours to meet the following objectives:

1. to scrutinize and understand the conceptual features underlying the LEADER programme, and reflect on the possible implications for the design of the evaluation approach;

2. to search in-depth and collect the intended uses of the LEADER evaluation as expressed by the LAG managers from different EU places and locations;
3. to search and examine communalities, difference and singular intentions and perspectives expressed by the LAG managers about the use of the LEADER evaluation, as well as the specific situational factors and experiences related to them;
4. finally, to discuss and inform evaluation decision-makers about the theoretical and practical elements to be considered when designing responsive and utilization-focused approach to evaluate LEADER at LAG level.

Given this set of specific objectives, the main research question addressed in this work is narrowed down and divided in three specific sub-research questions. Namely, these are:

RQ1: What are the specific conceptual features underlying the LEADER programme?
RQ2: Focusing on the utilization at LAG level, how do LAG managers intend to use the evaluation of LEADER?
RQ3: Which specific situational factors seem to influence mangers in their intended uses?

Research question one is addressed singularly in Chapter 6, while the results of research questions two and three are displayed and analysed together in Chapter 7. Finally, the findings of the main research question are discussed in Chapter 8.

5. Methodology

This thesis is concerned with exploring the nature of the LEADER programme, and identifying the intentions of the LAG managers about the use of the LEADER evaluation at the LAG level. Moreover, this thesis tries to unpack the intentions of the mangers, and explore what are the situational factors or influences underlying their purposes. The methodology relies on a mixture of inductive and deductive approach in order to answer the main research question through the direct observations and constructions directly expressed by the managers, as well as through the application of the theoretical concepts to sensitize the inquiry and the follow-up analysis. This entire chapter lays down the theoretical foundations and methods underpinning the overall thesis, and it is structured in four parts.

The first part, section 5.1, introduces the analytical framework used for understanding and conceptualizing the nature of the LEADER programme in regard to its approach, the scale of changes, the typology of activities supported, and the theory of change underlying the programme. Literature shows that the nature of the intervention influences the design of the programme evaluation approach, and vice versa (Rogers, 2009; 2008; Weiss, 1998). For example, in programmes supporting complex initiatives, such as innovative niches or networking platform for community development, the impacts and changes triggered by the intervention might risk to be jeopardized, hindered, or weakened if rigid protocol, standard indicators, or lineal evaluation models are preferred over adaptive and reflexive approaches to monitoring and evaluation (Mierlo et al., 2010; Patton, 2008). Therefore, one important step followed in the thesis is to scrutinize and critically understand and analyse the properties of LEADER, in order to shed lights on approaches that might match with the philosophy of LEADER.

Section 5.2 displays the tenets and concepts of the utilization-focused approach developed by Patton (2008), and specifically it introduces and describes briefly the types of use of evaluation process (Figure 1) and findings (Figure 2) that have been researched across the managers' intentions. The concepts introduced in Figure 1 and 2 are then used to guide the interviews and the answers collected during the fieldwork, as well as to sensitize and probe the managers towards the other uses which have not been inductively intended during the interview. In section 5.3, the research procedure (methods, sample, data analysis) is described in detail, and the descriptive statistics about the sample interviewed are displayed (Table 2). Finally, this Chapter closes with section 5.4 which elucidate the theoretical and methodological limits of the study.

5.1 Conceptualizing the Programme intervention

In this theoretical section, the focus is on the ways to analyse, understand, or conceptualize the nature of a programme. As Newcomer et al., (2015) suggests, a program is "*a set of resources and activities directed toward one or more common goals"*. Therefore, when conceptualizing the nature of a programme, there are four elements which need to be clearly analyzed:

1. the kind of *theory of change* framing the intervention (e.g. based on linear logic model, system change, or complex adaptive self-organising network).
2. *the scale of changes* triggered by the programme (e.g. individual, interpersonal, cultural or collective scale);

3. the kind of *approach* used for designing the theory of change (e.g. deductive, inductive, user-focused approach);
4. the *typology of activities* undertaken (e.g. standardised/uniform, heterogeneous/ contextualized);

5.1.1. Conceptualizing the theory of change

The theory of change is the set of linkages and relations composing the action chain, starting from the inputs and activities to the immediate outputs, the outcomes, and the ultimate impacts engendered by the intervention (Patton, 2008, p. 305). There are different analytical frameworks for analysing the theory of change of a programme, for example matrixes depicting simple to complex intervention (Glouberman & Zimmerman, 2002) or the Cynefin model to disentangle the theory of change in its simple, complicated, complex and chaotic aspects (Williams & Hummelbrunner, 2010). Drawing from Glouberman & Zimmerman (2002), an intervention can be categorised in three different typologies according to the conceptual framework underlying the the cause-effect chain leading to the programme changes: simple (linear cause-effect linkages), complicated (multiple components intervene in difficult effects), complex (causes and effects are continuously emergent and unpredictable).

The linear logic model frames the program as straight, single and linear causal path; the programme resources (financial, human, natural, etc.) are used as input to carry out certain activities, which in turn – assuming a high degree of certainty - produce outputs, achieve outcomes, and finally lead to impacts (Kellogg, 2004). By leaving out all the other contextual factors, and the interactions of different part of the same system, logic model frames programme as receipt suitable to solve simple problems, such as those defined by high agreement among institutional actors and high causal certainty between action and effect (i.e. if an intervention does X, it most likely will lead to Y).

System thinking or system theory frames the programs from a holistic perspective, by acknowledging that phenomena and intervention can be described as part of a system with multiple and interconnected elements enclosed within certain boundaries. Therefore, the ultimate impact of an intervention is not linear, but it is the result of *system dynamics* (Williams & Hummelbrunner, 2010). In this view, the contextual factors interconnected with the system (e.g. political economy, social norms, culture) intervene and influence the relationships among the program activities and actors and, with them its outcomes and impacts (Williams & Hummelbrunner, 2010). Through this view, the program is seen as an intervention in mutual relations with other parts, providing tools, resources, and institutions to make change, but that can also be changed by the system itself (Williams & Hummelbrunner, 2010; Rogers, 2008).

Finally, Complex Adaptive System or Complexity science breaks down the boundaries composing the systems, and frames the program intervention within a dynamic and open network of interacting parts; such interactions are recursive (feedback loops) and lead to disproportionate effects which cannot be planned at the outset because outcomes and bottlenecks emerge unpredictably (Ahmed, Elgazzar, & Hegazi, 2005). Therefore, complexity-based framework is used for conceptualize intervention where outcomes are uncertain and continuously emerging from dynamic situations, thus cause-effect relations are non linear but adaptive and responsive. Examples of this sort are programmes for social innovations, networking, community leadership, or community development (Patton, 2008).

5.1.2. Conceptualizing the elements promoting the different scale of changes

Every intervention presents elements and activities leading to different scales of changes. The scale of changes can be distinguished according to the geographical or institutional level, e.g. local, regional, national (Rogers, 2009) or as reported in Table 1, these can be recognized as individual, relation, cultural and systemic (Kusters, 2011). For example, initiatives that establish or support innovation brokers or innovation intermediaries, whose role is to match the demand and supply of knowledge infrastructure in agricultural innovations, are deemed to enhance changes at system level through the activities of demand articulation, network brokerage and innovation process management (Klerkx , 2008). In other programmes, activities promoting skill development or knowledge acquisitions can are deemed to engender changes at individual scale (Patton, 2008), even if the scale of change is never easy to delimitate or define unequivocally. However, the framework of Kusters reported in Table 1 is used in this thesis to guide the conceptual analysis of the LEADER programme in terms of scale of changes promoted.

Table 1: Individual, relational, cultural, and system scale of change

Individual Change	**Relational Change**
• Personal transformation • Help individuals grow and develop greater self-awareness • Education to broaden knowledge base • Training to broaden competency base • Attention to mental and spiritual health and growth • Transformations not only in 'what' one knows, but 'how' one knows (epistemology)	• Transforming relationships • Reconciliation / Conflict transformation • Building trust • Promoting respect and recognition • Increasing knowledge and awareness of interdependence • Changing patterns of dysfunctional relations
Culture Changes	**Structures / Systems Change**
• Transforming collective patterns of thinking and acting • Changing the 'rules' and values that sustain patterns of exclusion • Exploring and transforming taken-for-granted collective habits of thinking and behaviour • Promoting more inclusive, participatory culture of 'civic engagement'	• Transforming structures, processes, mechanisms • Lobbying for more just policies, greater transparency and accountability, institutional rearrangements • Just and equitable allocation of resources and services • Reforming processes

Source: (Kusters, 2011)

5.1.3. Approaches used for designing the theory of change

Patton (2008, p. 344) proposes four kinds of approaches for setting-up the theory of change behind the programme intervention: 1) *deductive approach* (based on academic theories); 2) *inductive approach* (based on qualitative research and observations to generate new grounded theory of change); 3) *user-focused approach* (working in collaboration with the intended stakeholders to turn their implicit theory of change into a new intervention); 4) a combination of them. Similarly, literature distinguishes essentially other three types of approaches for the design of the theory of change: top-down and bottom-up approaches (Ansell, 2000; Cerna, 2013; Copus & De Lima, 2014). Top-down means that decisions on the nature of the intervention (goals, strategy, activities) fall from higher

levels of programme governance to the lower ones in which the implementation takes place; contrarily, bottom-up approach refers to the "empowerment" or ownership of the stakeholders at local level to design and carry out the intervention according to their intentions and needs. Finally, other authors argue that a third, hybrid way between top-down and bottom-up is often the case for EU rural development (Ray, 1999b).

5.1.4. Typologies of supported activities

Activities are the composing elements of a programme (Newcomer, 2015). Among the alternative ways to categorise activities (e.g. economic, social, technological), Patrick (2010) argues that the activities can be distinguished in relation to the kind of the programme to which they belong to, namely:

1. **Activities in "vision-driven programs"** - The overall vision of the organization and the goals of its strategic programme define the characteristics and selection of the single activities. Activities are selected mainly because they are functional/instrumental, and in compliance to the realization of the strategy launched by the organization.
2. **Activities in "compliance programs"** – Projects and activities are mainly selected in compliance to the external requirements of the strategy (funders' requests, legislative limits, programme rules). In addition, as part of the external requirements to the programme, internal compliance with the vision-driven strategies might be respected.
3. **Activities in "emerging programs"** – Activities are continuously selected to capture emerging needs and opportunities within a complex and dynamic environment. Finally, the programme is the result of the combination and synergies created by the emergent activities and projects.

5.2. Focusing on the utilization of the evaluation

The utilization-focused approach for design and conducting evaluations is a philosophy (Patton, 2008); it is a way of thinking throughout all the steps of the evaluation, rather then a list of theoretical axioms. Being focused on the utilization means to design and conduct evaluation that are useful and influential according to the intended uses expressed by the intended users (Patton, 2003). Bearing this principle in mind, the role of the evaluators is to facilitate the intended users to go through an iterative process (Kusters, 2011; Patton, 2002) for:

1. assessing the readiness of the intended users to the evaluation process (e.g. are organizational capacities and resources sufficient for undertaking the evaluation? Are LAGs ready to involve a particular target of stakeholders? What political issues need to be tackled to conduct certain evaluation methods);
2. taking collective decisions about the evaluation purposes, principles, standards, stakeholders, and questions by keeping the focus on the final utilization (how useful is to account the performance of the strategy? Who can use the evaluation findings? What do LAGs benefit from involving more stakeholders along the evaluation?);
3. conducting and implementing the evaluation (setting the plan, the data collection, indicators, information needs, communication activities);
4. finally, evaluating the overall evaluation process.

Guiding the LAGs in this iterative process means to adapt the evaluation design on the specific situation in which it takes place, allowing the intended users to go back at any time, and to revise the decisions previously taken according to the unexpected changes of circumstances and conditions. Patton (2008, p. 199) defines a particular situation as the unique mixture of: "*politics, people, history, context, resources, constraints, values, needs, interests, and chance*" influencing evaluators in setting and implementing the evaluation. Williams & Hummelbrunner, (2010) exchange the term "situation" with "system" in order to emphasize the contingency and the social, cognitive, cultural, and pragmatic constructions with which the human actors make sense of a determined system. Systems or situations, therefore, are not prefixed sets of boundaries, actors, and interrelationships among its multiple parts. Systems are socially constructed by the human actors along the process of making sense about the world (Bachmann, 2016; Gubrium & Holstein, 2008; Christopher Ray, 1999a).

Patton (2008) argues that as every situation presents special conditions, circumstances, needs, values, interests and constraints, the designers of evaluation approaches should be aware of, and be responsive to such "situational factors". There are different methods and frameworks available to describe, make sense, or learn about a specific situation: e.g. Systemic Questioning, Scenario Technique, Critical Systems Heuristics, Causal-Loop Diagram, Soft System Methodology, and so on (Eoyang, 2006; Midgley, 2006; Williams & Hummelbrunner, 2010). Alkin (1983) and Burry et al., (1985) propose an analytical framework with four dimensions to organise the analysis of the situational factors influencing the design and conduction of the evaluation. These are related to the characteristics of: 1.) the evaluator; 2.) the intended user; 3.) the context in which it takes place; and the 4.) evaluation itself. Bearing in mind these theoretical lenses, the next chapter explains that semi-structured, face-to-face interviews based on a mixture of deductive concepts drawn from Alkin and Burry et al., and self-generated arguments of the managers are used to identify the situational factors perceived as influencing the intentions and design of the LEADER evaluation at LAG level.

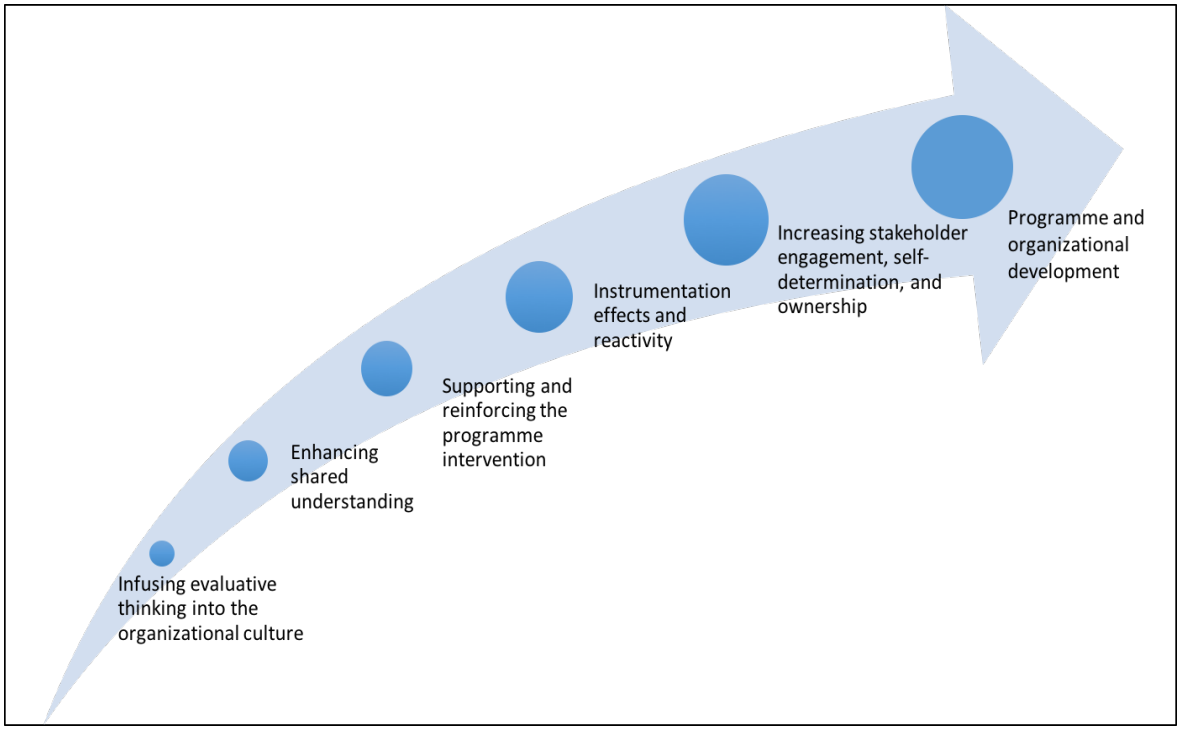
In this thesis, situations are not described by following a materialism-based approach, which makes use of economic or mathematical evidences, or objective figures and facts. The understanding of the situations, as well as the utility derived from the evaluation itself, are conceived as a social constructions of the intended users. Patton (2008) defines the intended users as the people who own interests and power over the decision about the set of purposes, criteria, and methods of evaluation (e.g. funders, programme manager, beneficiaries, citizens, etc.). Intended users are often referred with the term of stakeholders (people that have a stake in the evaluation). Greene (2006) developed four clusters of stakeholders, which seems to be quite broad and elusive, yet helpful to display the possible intended users of a programme evaluation:

1. The authorities of the programme (e.g. Funders, Policy-Makers, the Advisory Committee);
2. The direct responsible bodies (e.g. evaluators, managers, administrative staff);
3. The intended beneficiaries of the programme (e.g. the citizens, entrepreneurs, the community)
4. The people indirectly affected by the programme (e.g. the marginal groups excluded by the programme, the people disadvantaged by the intervention).

Among this list of stakeholders, Patton (2008, p. 72) leaves open the possibility for the programme authorities to define who are the primary intended users, which basically are the specific stakeholder selected to design, conduct, participate, interpret and make use of the evaluation.

In terms of intended uses, Patton (2008, p. 155) makes a clear distinction between the *process uses* and the *finding uses* of the evaluation. The process use refers to the different outcomes generated by and for the evaluation stakeholders due to their engagement in the process of evaluation, irrespective of the findings and recommendations that it produces. There is a long collection of studies focused on the process use of the evaluation, identifying the types and the benefits, as well as the activities and conditions related to its generation (Alkin & Taut, 2002; Forss, et al., 2002; Preskill & Zuckerman, 2003). The definitions of the single process uses are often redundant and overlapping with each, however, Forss et al., (2002) identify mainly five types of process uses for the stakeholders involved in this unfolding process: learning to learn, developing networks, creating shared understanding, strengthening the project, and boosting the moral. Patton (2008) adds other six distinct alternatives of process uses (Figure 1) of evaluation. This thesis employs mainly the concepts represented in Figure 1 from Patton (2008) for analysing the intentions expressed inductively by the LAG managers, as well as to sensitize them to reflect and comment about other types of process uses.

Figure 1: Alternative Process Uses of Evaluation



Source: own elaboration from Patton (2008, p. 158)

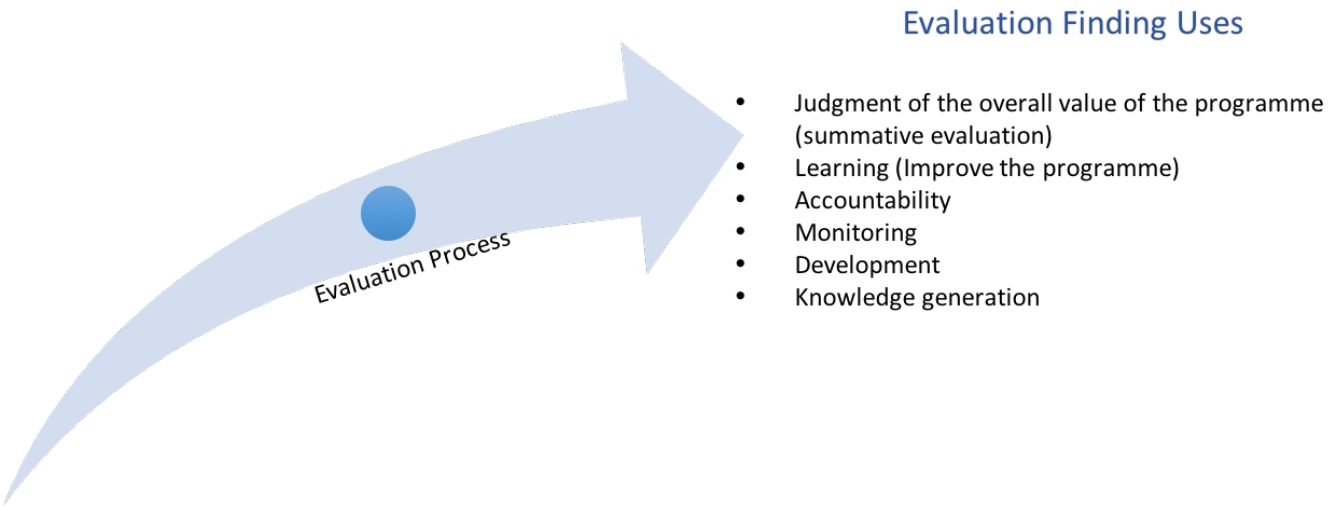
These process uses present some overlapping dimensions with the others (Patton 2008, pp.185-186), even if, each one corresponds to a specific outcome generated by the engagement of the intended users in the evaluation process, namely:

1. Infusing evaluating thinking into the organization culture is to build the evaluation capacity of the organizations, to integrate and align the decision-taking process with their final assessment and improvement, and to incorporate evaluation procedures into the everyday activities of the organization;
2. Enhancing shared understanding is to clarify the meaning, increase the knowledge, raise awareness, and align perspectives about the programme among its stakeholders;

3. Supporting and reinforcing the programme is to make the evaluation one integrating part of the delivery mechanisms of the programme, to use the evaluation for achieving the programme's expected results (e.g. networking during evaluation in programmes supporting networking and cooperation);
4. Instrumentation effects and reactivity is about affecting the evaluation stakeholders through the evaluation procedures (e.g. an interview with the beneficiaries can affect the values or beliefs of the evaluators; the collection of data can affect the way with which the programme is delivered; measuring the number of job created can lead to job creation);
5. Supporting engagement, self-determination, and ownership is to involve, collaborate or to empower the stakeholders along the process of evaluation;
6. Programme and organizational development is to make the organization leading the programme as the focus of the evaluation, to improve its responsiveness and capacity to adapt to always changing and complex circumstances.

The finding uses of an evaluation represent the substantial output and outcome generated by the evaluation itself. Finding and process uses are strictly connected and overarching concepts, yet different. This thesis interprets the process use as the outcomes due to HOW THE FINDINGS ARE PRODUCED (e.g. stronger networks due to higher stakeholder's involvement; increase of skills and competencies due to the management of difficult econometric models). On the other hand, the finding uses of the evaluation are conceived as the outcomes generated by THE SUBSTANTIAL CONTENT OF THE FINDINGS and WHAT ARE USED FOR. Finding uses represents the overall purposes of the evaluation (Patton, 2008). The first studies on the finding use distinguished three main purposes for the evaluation (Leviton & Hughes, 1981): instrumental (to inform decision makers and take follow-up actions), conceptual (to change the way people think about the programme), and symbolic (to give appearance to an evidence-based decision maker). This thesis relies on a more extended list with six types of evaluation finding uses (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Alternative Findings Uses of Evaluation



Source: own elaboration from Patton (2008, pp 140-141)

Each of these finding uses correspond to a specific purpose for the evaluation, namely:

1. Summative evaluation is about using the evaluation for judging the overall quality and merit of the programme (Was the programme effective, efficient, and relevant?);
2. Formative evaluation is to understand the features and the factors leading to the improvement of the programme (What does work? What are the weaknesses and strengths? How to improve the reactions of the participants to the programme?);
3. Accountability is to demonstrate that the activities and resources dedicated to the programme are managed efficiently and effectively for achieving the expected results (Are the goals being achieved? Is the set of indicators appropriate to show that results are being achieved? To what extend is the staff qualified to achieve the goals of the programme?);
4. Monitoring is to manage the resources and the activities of the programme, to identify problems and results ongoing, and to report the progress to the constituency (What are the output being realized? Who is participating during the programme activities? How many participants are being involved?);
5. Development is to support adaptation and responsiveness of the organization and its programme to the changing and complex conditions (How do the changes in the global legislation affect the programme results? What are the trends and changes that are manifesting outside the rural areas and how can the organization control or not control these trends?);
6. Knowledge generation is about researching and studying what are the principles leading to the effectiveness of the programme (How does the evaluation findings triangulate with the other research and theories? Which theoretical principles can be derived for future programmes from the findings emerged by the evaluation?).

From this list of six types of finding uses, the thesis has omitted the knowledge generation because experiences from the field has led to assume that this purpose is outside the limited scope, time, mandate, and resources of the LAGs in regard to evaluation.

5.3. Research Methods

5.3.1. Procedures

Two procedures are essentially followed in this thesis: 1) literature review and 2) in-depth and semi-structured interviews. To answer RQ1, the method used is purely deductive, and different theories, studies, evaluations reports, and documents are reviewed to critically analyse the features composing the nature of LEADER programme. To answer RQ2 and RQ3, a mixed of inductive and deductive approach is used. Moreover, the data is collected and analysed with a qualitative and explanatory perspective (Ritchie et al. 2013, pp. 29-30). Indeed, semi-structure interviews are chosen not only for collecting the intentions of the managers, as it could be done similarly through a questionnaire or survey. Semi-structured and face-to-face interviews allow the managers to have a certain freedom to express the meaning and views in their own terms (Bernard, 2006), as well as to leave flexibility to the researcher to interact with the managers, adapt the questions to the issues emerging unexpectedly, and to ask more explanations and clarifications about the stated intentions (Ritchie et al., 2013; Seidman, 2013). This is relevant to go below the intentions expressed by the managers, to understand "how" these varies across LAGs, to find association with aspects that are not necessarily related to the evaluation, and especially to identify "which" specific situational factors are underlying, interfering, or influencing their intended uses in a relevant manner.

The semi-structure interview is organized in two main topics (intentions about the uses of evaluation finding and evaluation process) and, per each topic, there are two iterative and interconnected phases. In the inductive phase, the researcher raises some open question and leaves space to the manager to freely express his/her own intentions about the use of the LEADER evaluation at LAG level. In the deductive phase, the researcher probes the respondents to react and contribute with his/her own view and range of experiences about different ways of using evaluation at LAG level. During the interviews, "why-alike" questions are used to explore the factors influencing the expressed intentions of the managers. By using the concepts displayed in Figure 1 and 2, the deductive phase allows the researcher to sensitize the managers to think about other possible evaluation uses. This is used to help the managers to clarify their primary intended uses, to gain more clues and descriptions about the intentions of the managers, thus to enrich the research with more insights and experiences about the situations and context around the LAGs from different EU areas.

Semi-structured interviews are conducted directly at the venue of the LAGs or through Skype call. The time and the style for the interview is the same between the fieldwork and the Skype call, however, the field visit allows the researcher to interact more with the managers, to visit some projects realized by the LAG, to link the interview with other secondary issues, to gain a more in-depth knowledge of the LAG, and to build confidentiality with the mangers. Most of the meetings and the interviews are organized directly with the help of the managers. In other cases, some gatekeepers are voluntarily facilitating the organization and conduction of the meeting with the managers. The interviews are mainly conducted in English language, and only in two cases other languages are used (Italian and Spanish). In the case of the Spanish, the interview is mediated by a translator. The interviews are audio-recorded with the consensus of the managers, and subsequently transcribed entirely for the data analysis.

5.3.2 Sampling and data

The conceptual analysis for answering the RQ1 is based on the literature about LEADER, ranging from the date of its first introduction (1991) to the current placing within the EU Cohesion policy (CLLD framework). The analysis make also uses of theories and works from other field of study related to community and place based development (human geography, spatial planning, complex adaptive system). Legislative documents, scientific works, theoretical studies, policy position papers, Power Point presentations to conferences, and the grey literature are used to disentangle and understand the nature of LEADER.

The semi-structure interviews used to understand the intentions by the intended users at LAG level are conducted specifically on the managers of the LAG (the outline of the interview is attached in Table 5, Annex). The managers are purposefully selected because of their profile and their particular position in the LAG organizational structure. Bryman (2015) and Patton (2005) argue that critical or typical case sampling is recommended when the research aims at understanding or examining the delivery of a particular policy within organizations, community, or through any other social actors. In the case of the evaluation for the LEADER at LAG level, managers are selected because they represent the main mediator between the LAG (board, staff, partners, etc.) and its connected community (beneficiaries, non-beneficiaries, local policy makers, entrepreneurs). Moreover, LAG managers are often temporarily stable within the LAG's life, or at least, are selected because of their long-lasting knowledge and experience about both the LEADER programme, the organizational

functions covered by the LAGs, as well as about the community and the place, with their physical assets, historical and cultural background, and political climate. LAG managers are selected because they deal with several decisions (financial, political, organizational, social), they facilitate the interactions among multiple stakeholders at different institutional level, they animate the territory, mediate between the actors from the market, government, and civil society, and have high stakes and power in regard to the LEADER evaluation at LAG level. Moreover, LAG managers have a broad overview about all the aspects related to the LEADER programme, they have in-depth knowledge about the organizational features of their LAGs, and finally they are responsible of all management aspects of the local development strategies. Given this set of variables, this thesis interviews the mangers to exploit their critical positions and gain an in-depth and representative understanding about the intentions of intended users at local level.

A total number of 13 interviews are conducted from 9 different Member States. Some descriptive statistics are reported in Table 2. In order to maximise the heterogeneity of the group and the richness of the data about the diversity of situations at LAG level, the interviews are conducted in different regions from the EU territory. The rationale of this strategy is twofold (Ritchie et al., 2013, p. 83). First, it increases the likelihood to identify a wider range of situations and intentions varying across different geographically dispersed managers. Secondly, it allows the researcher to compare differences and identify common pattern, divergences, or distinct situations. The managers are selected and contacted through any kind of mean: announcements on LEADER-related social networks, direct phone calls to the LAG offices, or snow-ball method through managers and other LEADER-involved actors.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of the sample interviewed

EU Member States	***No of interviews***	***Method***	***Years of experience of the Manager in the LAG***	***Academic Background***
Belgium	1	Field visit	a. 13	a. Landscape architecture
Denmark	2	Field visit	b. 15 c. 7	b. Anthropology and international cooperation c. Social Science
Estonia	1	Field visit	d. 11	d. Forestry and Human geography
Finland	3	Field visit	e. 13 f. 10 g. 18	e. Social Science f. Business & Administration g. Social Science
Italy	1	Skype call	h. 12	h. Social Science
Latvia	2	Field visit	i. n.r. j. n.r.	i. Art and craft j. Management
Spain	1	Skype call	k. 29	k. Agricultural Science
The Netherlands	1	Field visit	l. n.r.	l. n.r.
United Kingdom	1	Skype call	m. 8	m. Management

n.r. = not registered

5.3.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis consists of a thematic coding analysis through the ATLAS.ti software. The main codes to analyse the data are set up in advanced, and derived by the concepts explained in Figure 1 and 2, or emerging directly from the answers reported by the managers. The software is used to find patterns of similarities and dissimilarities, as well as for identifying particular claims, warrants, and data in relation to 1) the intended uses and 2) the specific situational context in which they lay down. According to Attride-Stirling (2001, p. 387), in the thematic analysis, claims can be considered as the conclusions to one argument. In the context of this work, claims represent the intentions of the managers, the substantial answers to questions alike "*how do you intend to use evaluation*?", "*who should use it*", "*what is more relevant for you*?". Warrants, instead, are the premises and the principles upon which these claims are constructed (e.g. values, meaning, etc.), which are triggered by why-alike questions during the interviews (e.g. "*why is it important to involve citizen*?" "*Why is it relevant for you to learn*?"). The data refers to the evidences used by the managers to back up their intentions. Often, these consist of direct or previous evaluation experiences, or other situational factors linked to the intentions.

5.4. Limits of the study

This work presents several limits related to both the theory and the procedures used to conduct the research. This sections explain these limits and provide some suggestions that could be used for overcoming them. Due to the lack of means, these theoretical limits could not be tackled and overcome in this work.

5.4.1 Theoretical limits

✓ **Matching the design of the approach to the intended uses of stakeholders do not necessarily increase utilization of the LEADER evaluation**

This thesis tries to capture the intentions of the LAG managers with the premises to contribute to LEADER evaluation approaches that are more responsive to the pragmatic circumstances of LAGs, thus more influential and utilization-focused. However, the utilization of the evaluation enterprise is not a business between demand and offers. Utilization depends upon other institutional factors, starting from the social construction of the concept itself, and of the parameters or variables available and used to measure it (Patton, 2008). Dahler-Larsen (1998, 2011) argue that to increase utilization of the evaluation, it is recommendable to adopt different theoretical lenses, encompassing the institutional or sociological perspectives. To make good use of the LEADER evaluation, this research should beyond the understanding of the intentions of the mangers, and look at how larger institutions (routine, practices, norms, rules, roles) interact dualistically with all the evaluation machine and stakeholders, or to understand the contextual forces and the sociological constructions in which the utilization of the LEADER evaluation occurs. Even if this thesis has dedicated a relevant focus to understand the relations between the intentions and the situational factors perceived as relevant at LAG level, an explanatory and ethnographic study following the organizational work of the LAG, with a longer timespan and more holistic approach, by studying specifically the interconnections between different sub-systems (the community, the EU legislation, the market, etc.) would have make this thesis more revelatory in terms of circumstances, conditions, and factors leading to a better utilization of the LEADER evaluation.

✓ **Conceptual mess: what is an "intention"?**

This thesis is largely based on understanding the intentions expressed by the intended users of the LEADER evaluation. However, one big limit of this work is that the definition of what is an intention has never been set up or provided, either in the text nor during the interviews. Patton (2008) and most of the literature about utilization-focus evaluation that has been reviewed in this field, do not seem to provide a clear and straightforward definition of what is an "intention". Therefore, it is not yet clear how an intention differs from a wish, a want, a need, an idea, or from a solid and firm decision rather than just a free and momentary interpretation. An intention could be interpreted as need although the concepts are different, but strictly associated (Jamieson, 2011). LAG managers may have had a need in the evaluation, but this need does not implicitly mean that managers would really intend to fulfil. Furthermore, intentions could be a noun or a verb; a solution or just a problem to solve. Intentions could be also distinguished as individual, collective or societal. These linguist and conceptual differences, but also synonymous and multiple meanings have created a large hole in the comparison of intentions made between the managers. A clarification of what an "intention" is within the context of this research, and its explanation to the managers during the introduction phase of the interview, would have reduced this terminological gap, guiding the interviews towards the same direction, and allowing the researcher to compare correctly intentions on the same common ground. Another solution would have been to ask to the managers to define what is an "intention" in their own terms, or to study how the concept of "intention for evaluation" is conceived. However, these kinds of discourse or thematic analyses are not dealt because they lie outside the scope of the present study.

✓ **What is "your" situation?**

Do real situations exist or every situation is socially constructed by the belief, the understanding, the culture and the worldviews of the social actors? This thesis has opted for the second ontological stand, by passing the floor to the managers for expressing and describing with their own words the situations influencing the LEADER evaluation at LAG level. However, the open question is: "*to what extend can these single constructions be sharable among other different stakeholders at LAG level*?". This study relies largely on the description attached by the managers, for the reasons explained in Chapter 5.3.2. However, it does not account that the managers themselves can bring into play personal perceptions, feelings, attitudes, belief, and views about the evaluation enterprise, which do not necessary reflect the intentions of the whole LAG. A manager of the LAG could believe that marginal groups, emigrants or other excluded social groups in the community are not to be a situational factor influencing the evaluation design at all; another member of the same LAG could feel that the pressure of the media on the EU emigration crises, or the societal will of the community for more inclusive and participatory practices in community development programs can play a big role in the way with which the LEADER evaluation should be designed and conducted. The wide range of perspectives about which situational factors play a role in the evaluation limits the thesis to understand only what the worldview and intentions as described by the managers, rather than by the collective descriptions of the local evaluation stakeholders.

5.4.2 Methodological limits

✓ **Sample size**

Even if the purpose of this qualitative inquire is not to elaborate general conclusions that are statistically representative of a presumed reality, the study is limited by the low heterogeneity of the selected sample. Especially in studies investigating the diversity of the subject inquired (e.g.

intentions, situations), the heterogeneity of the sample should be very high (Ritchie et al., 2013, p. 117). In this case, the research for diversity in terms of situations and intentions about the LEADER evaluation at LAG level could be more generous and rich if the interviews are conducted on different kinds of stakeholder at LAG level (the chairman or chairwoman of the LAG, the beneficiaries, the community). However, a lack of means and resources has limited the study only to the interviews with the managers.

✓ Are intentions really intended?

Many qualitative researches suffer in terms of reliability, that is the extend to which the research can achieve the same results after repeated trials (Martin & Gaskell, 2000). Interviews a limited by the likelihood that the interviewees can consciously or unconsciously reveal opinions, intentions, and statements which, for some reason, could mislead the researcher (Diefenbach, 2009). This hypothesis, especially in the context of evaluation (or being evaluated), could negatively affect the reliability and trustworthiness of the final conclusions. A triangulation of the interviews with other LAG actors (staff, the main director, partners, beneficiaries etc.), or with observations of written documents (e.g. the local development strategy, the minutes of meetings, the reports of previous evaluation experiences), or by repeating the interviews with the same managers but in different times, would have reduced the risk of possible misleading intentions (and the researchers' interpretation thereof), and improve the internal validity[3] of the conclusions. A lack of means did not allow the researcher to overcome this limit.

✓ Methods of data collection

According to the utilization-focused approach, decisions about evaluations should be facilitated among the intended users of the evaluation. Despite the limited resource available, the scope of the current study, and the organizational challenges to involve different stakeholders from other geographical areas, this study would have benefited more in terms of understanding if the data was generated through group discussion. A focus group with various stakeholders from different institutional level, or any other mean to generate collective interpretations, description, and intentions would have increased the in-depth understanding of situations around the LEADER evaluation at LAG level, emphasizing the importance of the roles covered by different social actors, the power relations among them, the way with which the intended users talk and interact about the same issue of evaluation, and finally to increase the relevance of this inquiry in terms actions (e.g. follow-up evaluation decisions, building of a common understanding among the subjects interviewed).

✓ Language

The limits related to the lack of a common definition about the principal concepts used in this thesis (e.g. misinterpretation of meanings, problems of comparison) can be exacerbated when the participants of the interview speak a language which is not the native one. Most of the semi-structure interviews are conducted in English, and in some cases, this could influence the participants to express their thoughts and "intentions" differently from how they would have done in their own

[3] Drawing from Winter (2000), internal validity refers to the extend to which the statements recorder during the interview reflect the real intentions of the managers

language. This issue might limit the study for building a richer picture and understanding about the intentions and situations at LAG level.

✓ Data analysis

This thesis is based on a mixture of deductive and inductive approach for collecting and analysing data. Codes from Figure 1 and 2 are used to guide the researcher in collecting, comparing, and understanding the findings. Besides the potential bias and misleading effects generated by the use of *a priori* codes to sensitize the managers during the interviews, the data analysed and conclusions emerged can be limited in terms of intra- and inter-rater reliability (Harwood & Garry, 2003). To increase the intra-rater reliability (applying the same code on the same intentions after repeated data analysis), the researchers has repeatedly listened the interview records for several times, read the transcriptions for more than three times, and ask some feedbacks from the supervisor to test if agreement was found on the correct application of a certain code to some given intentions expressed by the managers. However, the codes used are not always straightforward, mutually exclusive, and exhaustive (e.g. process use and finding use could sometimes overlap). A better tightening-up of the codes, or their further breaking down into more strict and precise definitions (accountability vs upwards, horizontal, or downwards accountability) would have helped the researcher to increase the confidence with the coding, the diversity of results emerging from the interviews, and the intra-rater reliability. In terms of inter-rater reliability (reaching the same conclusions by applying different codes to the same data), the data analysis would have ben less limited if, for example, the five types of process use identified by Forss et al., (2002) were applied together with, or instead of the six types of process use implemented by following Patton (2008).

✓ Following the "surprise"

During the data collection, some interesting and surprising results have emerged. One of the most striking refers to the case of the developmental LAG (see Chapter 7.1.3), or in general, to the several retroactive questions posed by the managers to the researcher aimed at knowing the dynamics and changes happening in the LEADER system outside their own community development strategies. The particular way of conceiving and thinking about the evaluation (developmental) compared to the classic form of accountability and learning in LEADER is to some extend a surprise for the researcher. However, a special focus or in-depth, follow-up interviews are not conducted. This would allow to dig more into the surprises, to reveal more their features and facets, and test their internal validity compared to the potential theoretical bias of the researcher.

6. Conceptualizing the LEADER programme

Turning to its fifth programming period in the 2014-2020, the LEADER initiative is a programme launched in the 1991 by the European Union under to support local development in rural areas. As part of the Rural Development Policy (RDP), the programme is based on a specific approach, so called LEADER method (see Chapter 6.3. on the *LEADER approach*). Updated figures and data about the resources allocated to LEADER for the current period 2014-2020 are still under construction up to date. However, to give an impression about its little financial dimension within the whole RDP, in the previous programming period 2007-2013, National and European Public funds invested together around 8,9 billion Euro for the overall LEADER programme, which is around the 5% of the total EU RDP budget (European Court of Auditor, 2010).

The conceptualization of the LEADER programme can be divided in two main levels of governance. The local level, in which the LEADER programme materializes in the form of Local Development Strategy (LDS), managed under the direction of Public-Private Partnerships called Local Action Groups (LAGs). The extra-local level, that is the Regional, National and European, in which the LEADER programme, during the last programming period, corresponded to one single axis of RDP dedicated on the improvement of the Quality of life in rural areas. From the current programme period, the axis has turned into one single measure/operation[4] (EU Parliament & Council, 2013, art. 42-44) contributing to specific focus areas of the RDP at Regional, National and European level. This second level of programme is managed by several trans-local actors, such as Regional/National Managing Authorities (MAs), European/National/Regional formal and informal Rural Development Networks (ENRD, NRN, ELARD), Desk Officers, Paying Agencies, and a long list of organizations. Together, these social actors embedded into different level of governance work in mutual interrelation, in order to ensure coherence among the single LDS with the larger EU objectives, as well as to improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and impact of the overall LEADER programme.

6.1. The complexity of the LEADER 's theory of change

To study the specific Theory of Change (ToC) of LEADER programme at extra-local level, it is necessary to look at the intervention logic of the EU RDP. From 2014 onwards, each of 118 rural development programme from 28 Member States (see Figures 9 and 10 attached to the Annex) is planned to ensure that the public resources dedicated to LEADER can contribute predominately to the achievement of the RDP Union Priority number six, standing for *"promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas"*. Moreover, the RDP Regulation foresees that the LEADER programme can complementarily purse any of the remaining five RDP Union Priorities, which are reported in Table 6 attached to the Annex. The raises two main evaluation challenges for the evaluators at EU level: the first is to capture the what extend to which LEADER contribute to the promotion of social inclusion, poverty reduction, and economic development in rural areas; the second is to assess the secondary or complementary contributions of LEADER to the whole RDP programme. To answer these broad evaluation questions at EU level, and to understand the

[4] Operation 19 of the Rural Development Programme, further divided into four sub-operations.

factors leading to the answers, it is necessary to start looking at small scale, at the ToC developed at LAG level.

At local level, the ToC might be considered more straightforward and less abstract, yet only in relative terms respect to the EU casual framework explained above. Whilst it is difficult here to describe the single ToC underlying around 2050 LDSs foreseen in LEADER/CLLD from 2014 onwards, specific attention is dedicated only on one of the commonest aspect shared by these strategies, such as the integration of the following multiple resources and activities (EU Reg. 1305/2013):

1. Preparatory activities to develop the local strategy;
2. Networking and animation activities;
3. Cooperation activities;
4. Running activities for the LAGs itself (operating, training, personal costs);
5. Financial instruments to implement the projects of the local strategy.

Whatever the local needs, assets, and specific goals will be, every LAG combines these six instruments and resources to design and implement their LDS. By definition, the overriding goal recurrent in the LEADER programme is the promotion of linkages between the rural economy and development actions, as reflected by its acronym: *"Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'économie rurale"*. As suggested by Huylenbroeck & Durand (2003), Ray (1999b), and Wilson (2007), LEADER can be conceived as policy tool to integrate the agricultural sectors to other place-based dimensions and sectors (social, cultural, political, etc.), thus to enhance a more sustainable economic development in rural areas (European Commission - DG AGRI, 2011). In addition to the idea of connecting multiple dimensions, as similarly fomented by the interactional approach to rural development (Bridger & Alter, 2008), the theory underlying the LEADER strategies assumes that Public-Private Partnerships for carrying out animation, networking, and cooperation activities, are able to give an add value respect to conventional, top-down measures of the RDP (Ray, 1997; Scott, 2004), e.g. by generating social capital, fostering innovation, improving rural governance, and building local identity in areas which are often (referred as) "lagging behind" in the era of modernity (European Commission, 2000b; Farrell, 2000).

LEADER is quite far from being a canonical and orthodox programme. Literature shows that the linearity in the LEADER theory of change is often undermined and contested by its inherent programme mechanisms, as well as by several external factors and forces related to the socio-economic trends occurring in the EU (Copus & De Lima, 2014; Lindberg, et al., 2012; Pylkkänen & Hyyryläinen, 2004; Shucksmith, 2000). Differently from what is assumed by the reading the policy documents describing the LEADER programme (DG –AGRI 1994, 2000, 2011), experience from England and Scotland have critically analyzed LEADER for its (in)ability to generate social capital, as well as for its deleterious effects on social inclusion (Shortall & Shucksmith, 1998; Shucksmith, 2000). Others authors have emphasized the complex interrelations existing between the social and human arenas within which LEADER is adopted, and the effects that this reciprocal interrelations have on its final outcomes (Katona & Fieldsend, 2006; Petri, 2010). Duguet (2006, p. 12) has pointed out the challenges, or utopia in the networking activities supported by LEADER to harmonize the way of thinking and doing development among EU rural communities. Yet, when linearity is instead

assumed, this has been criticized for its misleading contribution to the development pathways in German rural areas (Bruckmeier, 2000). Finally, Ray (1999a, 1999b) has raised doubts and challenged the ability of the LEADER programme to lead towards outcomes embracing the whole local and territorial development. In addition to this flow of critics, the interview with a LAG manager explains this lack of linearity in a very emblematic and simple way:

"Somebody [referring to Brussels] *thinks that the LEADER programme is like a spaghetti because you need to write a straightforward, linear strategy at the outset of the programme period. However, my experience says that when we put that strategy in the boiling water of our place, it ultimately melts like a spaghetti".*

If the LEADER's theory of change at local and extra-local level is meant to be canonical or straightforward, the perception of this manager, as well as the flow of critics reviewed above would indicate the opposite, and different frameworks for its conceptualization should be considered. Indeed, multiple factors lead the LEADER programme to achieve unpredictable results. For example, top-down structures can hinder the participatory and bottom-up principles of LEADER, or a lack of bottom-up initiative can sustain the dominance of single policy makers over community development (Marquardt et al., 2012). The incorporations of local development initiatives into national government processes and structure can be more effective in terms of local development than a real move to bottom-up, area-based theory of changes (Storey, 1999; Nemes et al., 2014). The history of social movements, the physical infrastructures, or the presence of a strong network of local actors have been deemed to influence the the way through which the LEADER's theory of change performs and change the rural development (Bruckmeier, 2000). Not only reciprocal inter-relations exist between LEADER and the context in which it takes place, but also within the elements of the LEADER's theory of change. Economic and power dimensions can enter into conflict with the social and innovative initiatives (Bruckmeier, 2000; Shucksmith & Chapman, 1998). The public financial supports that guarantee a stable source of resources for different programme cycles can also negatively hinder the autonomy, social mobilization, and self-sustainability of communities and regional areas (Barke & Newton, 1997; Bruckmeier, 2000). All these mutual and unpredictable interdependences suggest that a different framework should replace the linear thinking that could be assumed in the LEADER's ToC, and complex adaptive system theories are rather perceived more appropriate for the LEADER's conceptualization and evaluation.

6.2. The LEADER elements promoting different scale of changes

Given the heterogeneous and scattered experiences among EU rural areas, it is difficult to generalize on the ability of LEADER to trigger changes at system or multi-scale level. Contradictorily, LEADER can potentially be able to unchain or transform declining path, or

contrarily, to further perpetuate or strengthen certain vicious circles that trap communities into their socio-economic problems (European Commission - DG AGRI, 1994, 2010; Lopolito et al. 2011). The next section 6.3 on the *LEADER approac*h illustrates some of the flaws and critics regarding the extent to which LEADER can directly be linked to systemic changes. In this section, the general deduction made about the scale of change points out the importance of "how" the LEADER programme and method is implemented, rather than "what" it promotes, provides, and consists of. The dependency from who and how the LEADER programme is managed seem to determine the heterogeneity of scale of effects among EU areas, which range from initiatives affecting only individual subjects to those targeting to the changes at community level (European Court of Auditor, 2010; Marquardt et al., 2012). For example, collective-targeted activities such as the provision of financial instruments to purchase public equipment, to create networking platform, and to develop small-scale public infrastructure (e.g. training and interest clubs, leisure activities, cultural events) can be associate to the promotion of rural diversification or to a general improvement in the people's quality of life. On the other hand, individual-targeted activities, such as vocational training, technical support, or provision of grants for small-business projects can lead to increasing *know-how,* entrepreneurship*,* and individual competences (European Commission - DG AGRI, 1998). Both cases are likely to trigger individual and collective changes for the whole community. However, several studies have shown that the degrees to which the LEADER instruments are able to achieve all these scales of intended changes, and especially to catalyze inter-personal and collective change, rest in the hands of the local stakeholders and actors who concretely promote and adopt these instruments (Copus & De Lima, 2014; Duguet, 2006; Metis GmbH, 2010; Petri, 2010). In fact, in the LEADER history, some authors have claimed that parochialism, patronage, and social exclusion are present in the programme (Perez, 2000; Ray, 1997; Storey, 1999) and the list of negative implications might be also longer if a culture of reflecting on bad practices was more widespread in the LEADER community. Therefore, when discussing on the LEADER elements and its ability to promote different scale of change, it is necessary to observe them from a critical and context-based perspective, otherwise generalizations might be misleading.

In the spectrum of scale of changes, many differences emerge also in terms of geographical scale: local, regional, national and EU level (Bruckmeier, 2000; European Commission - DG REGIO, 2011; Rizzo, 2013). The relation between different geographical scales of change is not always cumulative or synergic, but change case-by-case (Barke & Newton, 1997), and according to different perspectives. Human geographers argue that the lines limiting and binding the scale of effects in place-based development intervention depends really much by the discourses, ideologies, and social constructions attached by the social actors to the local, regional, national, or international dimensions (Cresswell, 2014). Bachtler (2010) links the ability of place-based policy as LEADER to achieve multi-scale of changes with the degree with which localities and regions have been integrated into the EU Multi-level governance. Different perspectives agree and disagree about the specific kind of changes, and the relation between their different levels of scale. The case of the cultural changes promoted by the LEADER programme might reveal this kind of inference.

To take an example in terms of cultural changes, the LEADER+ programme envisaged four typologies of action in this respect (European Commission - DG AGRI, 1994): 1.) promotion of regional identity; 2.) exploitation of cultural heritage; 3.) creation of permanent cultural infrastructures (cultural centers, eco-museums); 4.) organisation of specific cultural activities

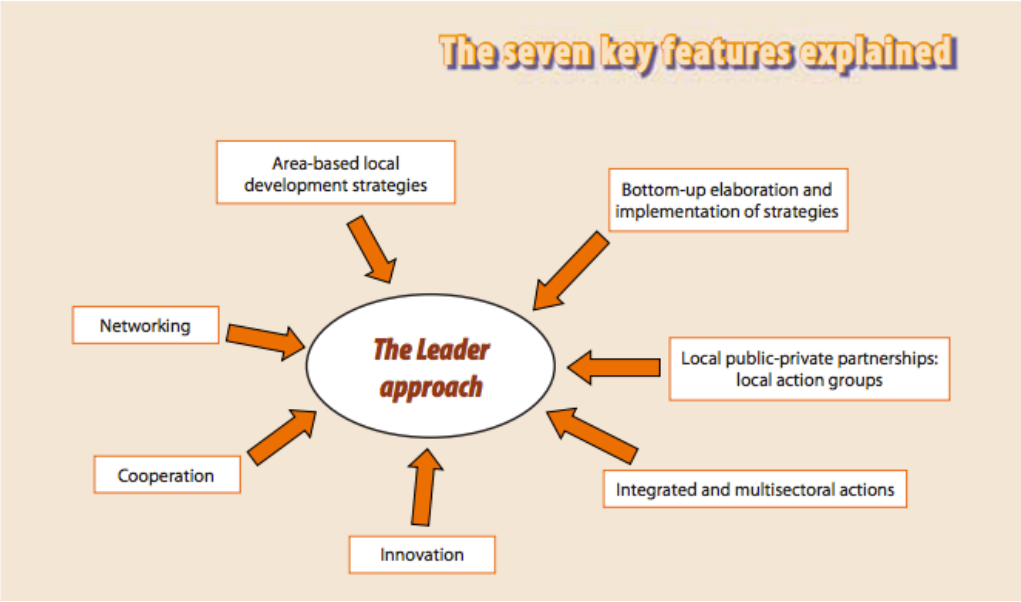
(entertainment and festivals). In the "post-rural" debate, culture and identity are considered as the engine for territorial and endogenous development (Florida, 2002, 2005; Ray & Behera, 2006). In his article about the "*Endogenous Development in the Era of Reflexive Modernity*", Ray (1999) talks about the socio-cultural development initiatives promoted by LEADER as dialectical encounters between the local and extra-local dimensions. Accordingly, local identity and culture are continuously exposed to the dynamic extra-local forces, and through these rapid encounters, identity is transformed and sometimes *undermined*. However, especially when these forces have outraged the community self-identity, cultural events can also enable the local society to get out from identity crises, and to reconstruct a new (reflexive) ones in order to prevent territorial dis-functionality. Thus, local and extra-local relations can construct, undermine, or reconstruct each other continuously and mutually.

This reference wants to show that the same LEADER cultural events can be seen in two different ways: the first one, in which they are used as weapons to defend and perpetuate local identity from the threatens of external forces; the second, as Ray argues, in which they can create spaces through which global and regional cultural movements meets with the local agenda, and by doing so, a deep re-interpretation and revitalization of the local culture is triggered. This example on the cultural changes shows that LEADER and rural development have complex feedback loops between different scale of change (local and extra-local), which challenge a presumed input-output or cumulative relation from the local and the extra-local (Weckroth & Kemppainen, 2016). The scale of change of LEADER is as much constructed as the concept of local, regional, national and EU dimensions, and this example wants to show that the same element of change (i.e. cultural event) has one single lemma but different connotations, purposes, and intended results as much as the several historical, ideological, and political variables underlying the concept of place-based and community development.

6.3 The LEADER Approach

The LEADER approach or method is considered to be one of most innovative and effective instrument of EU RDP interventions (EENRD, 2016). According to the narrative of the EU legislation (2000; 2013), LEADER is a programme based on a *bottom-up* approach, meaning that development strategies are mainly drawn by local private-public actors, set up upon the local assets and needs, and aims to overcome constrains which are inherent to a certain place. An extensive body of literature has described each of the key seven features of the LEADER method (Charlier, 2001; Dargan & Shucksmith, 2008; European Commission, 2000b, 2006; EU Parliament & Council, 2013). The seven principles of LEADER approach are reported in Figure 3. Given the vastness of the study undertaken about the LEADER approach (Charlier, 2001; EENRD, 2016; Metis GmbH, 2010), this section focuses on the attention only on the the bottom-up principle (often referred as participatory), in order to show that the LEADER method is not a bundle of principles that flow as standard and objective codes across places and actors, but its meaning and application changes according to the specific interpretation and implementation in the local/heuristic domain. Therefore, the substantial concepts of innovative, participatory, local or area-based are not satisfactory or satisfying to conceptualize the intricate nature of the LEADER approach, but it should be research into the context of their implementation and through the use of multiple theoretical frameworks and views. This little section unlocks the often taken-for-granted conceptualization of LEADER as bottom-up approach, and offers some critical insights that challenge the common view of LEADER as it is portrayed by its seven essential principles.

Figure 3: The LEADER approach



Source: (European Commission, 2000b)

The *bottom-up* spirit embodied into the LEADER approach can be retrieved in several Rural Development theories, such as: the endogenous, or more recently, neo-endogenous rural development (Ray & Behera, 2006; Ray, 1999a; Shucksmith, 2000), place-based (Bachtler, 2010; Barca, 2009; Bridger & Alter, 2008; Ward & Brown, 2009), multi-level governance (Bache & Flinders, 2004; George, 2004; Liesbet & Gary, 2003), and network-oriented approach (Ansell, 2000; Attride-Stirling, 2001; Murdoch, 2000). Of course, this list of theories is not conceived to homogenize different conceptual frameworks. Each of them present several similarities and differences, and their association with the LEADER does not implies that the latter fully incorporates their essential theoretical principles, nor it means that LEADER ultimately implements the theories in practices.

However, these same authors have linked the LEADER approach with these frameworks because of its inherent features, which interconnect and integrate several dimensions (social, cultural, economic, environmental, political), actors (public & private, local & non-local), and level of governance (EU, Regional, local) into a single community development programme. Through LEADER, National Governments devolve power, resources, and institutions (rules, responsibilities, mechanisms) to local communities to search for a more efficient and effective rural development governance and policy (Nemes et al., 2014). In exchange, local stakeholders at ground level are invited to own, design, and lead their "local" development strategy from the bottom, taking into account multiple stakeholders, as well as the main strengths and assets of the place, with its socio-economic resources, and political and cultural values (Bridger & Alter, 2008). At this point, to conceptualize LEADER as bottom-up approach, three critical reflections are enlightened.

First, drawing from the theories of the human geography and the relational turn of the EU rural development (Copus & De Lima, 2014; Massey, 2013; Newby, 1986), the focus of LEADER on the locality can be undermined for the extend to which geographical and administrative boundaries governing the programme can really mark LEADER as local, rather than as extra-local development initiative. Especially with EU places mediating increasingly the interactions between the global and

the local, and through different channels and relations, there is a strong need to reconsider the concept of bottom-up, turning it into one which is more coherent and responsive to the current evolutions happening in the EU rural and non-rural areas: e.g. penetration of the digital infra-structure (e.g. Estonia is totally covered by digital networks[5]), common energy and labor markets, cross-boundary education (Copus & De Lima, 2014). Therefore, pragmatic and conceptual elements challenge the conceptualization of LEADER as a faithful "bottom-up" programme, and invite to a deep review of its common understanding. The challenge to the bottom-up nature of LEADER is not only theoretical, but also directly linked to its intrinsic characteristics, such as the financial support given to LAGs for establishing transnational and interregional cooperation projects for exchanging of goods, services, and practices[6].

The second challenge has to do with the State's devolvement of power, or EU subsidiarity. In policy systems with nested and interrelated level of governance, such devolvement takes the form of the Multi-Level Governance (MLG). As mentioned earlier in this work, LEADER presents a multi-level structure (EU, National, Regional, and local). Moreover, according to Liesbet & Gary, (2003) and Thompson (2003), the MLG underpinning the LEADER programme can be disentangles into three main institutional layers: the governmental layer (i.e. EU, MSs, Regions, and Local); market or economic layer; and the civil society layer. Each institutional layer mobilizes symbols, framings, meanings and ways of doing, and through the encounters of these layers, synergies as well as tensions can emerge or dominate over the other. To give an example, some authors have pointed out that the managerial and technocratic framings lent by government-supported projects (as LEADER) create inhibitory effects on the promotion of participation, innovation and learning, which ultimately disrupt or jeopardize the expected change targeted by programme itself (Barke & Newton, 1997; Nemes et al., 2014). One example comes from an interview conducted during this thesis to a British farmer rearing alpacas in Latvia. After the invitation to participate to the LEADER programme for extending the number of social and environmental services of the farm, the farmer reacted as following:

"I don't want to stick my future into the EU bureaucracy. If my alpacas or my ideas to diversify this farm are damaged by the weather or by any other unpredictable conditions, who is going to payback them? There are too much conditions to comply and sometimes they don't consider my situation here. In Latvia, winter is really crucial for the overall ecology. If something gets wrong, who can really explain my situation to the EU rules?"

Farm in Ērgļi (Latvia), 11 April 2016

[5] Estonia (2016) Retrieved from http://estonia.eu/about-estonia/economy-a-it/e-estonia.html on 29 May 2016
[6] ENRD (2016) LEADER cooperation. Retrieved from https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/en/leader/transnational-cooperation on 04 May 2016

The example reported is to show that the premises for a bottom-up approach as it is envisaged by the LEADER approach can be seriously undermined when some of institutional framings (rules) exchanged along the MLG (EU, National/Regional and local) dominate over, or mismatch with the realities of the other institutional layers (civil society, market, government). In this case, the wish to revitalize the local community in East Latvian countryside by providing recreational services (i.e. felting workshops) has shown to challenge the bottom-up nature of the LEADER, especially when supports or rules are poorly flexible and adaptive to the specific conditions faced by the civil or economic actor.

The third point regards the link (or lack of thereof) between the bottom-up approach and the expected effects on community empowerment or ownership as it is envisaged by the LEADER programme. In several documents, the aim of increasing community ownership and empowerment spill over LEADER, and in general, to place-based programmes of the EU Cohesion policies (Barca, 2009; European Commission - DG REGIO, 2014; European Commission, 2000b, 2014b). However, the concept of empowerment is not a straightforward term, and several conceptual and practical differences might emerge from different theoretical foundations and schools (Wils, 2001), for example: Marxian, Interactional, Gramscian and Freirean, Feminism, or Modernity. In these different forms of empowerment, the conceptualization of LEADER does not seem to have a well-stated position. Among these school of thoughts, the LEADER programme seems to overlap to a great extend to the view suggested by Korten (1990), who conceives empowerment as supporting the local stakeholders to gain control over the community resources, and to make the most effective and efficient use (European Commission, 2000a; Farrell, 2000; Lopolito et al., 2011). However, this kind of conceptualization can lead the LEADER programme to support mainly the most proactive actors (Bruckmeier, 2000), the actors who are able to make the best use and "benefit" of area-based resources, thus increasing efficiency, effectiveness, and relevance of the programme, so as it is assessed by the EU evaluation (European Commission, 2014; 2000a; 2002). This way of conceptualizing empowerment as gaining control over resources have been proved to raise the risk of creating social exclusion and unbalanced territorial development, as it is registered in several experiences around the LEADER programme (Commins, 2004; Copus & De Lima, 2014; Shucksmith & Chapman, 1998), and challenges the way of conceiving the bottom-up approach as mean or goal to integrate the whole community into a collective decision-making process for the local development (Wils, 2001).

In conclusion, to understand or conceptualize the LEADER approach as bottom-up, innovative, or area-based, the reading of the seven principles is not enough, and sometimes it can also be misleading. A closer and critical look, involving multiple theoretical lenses, stakeholders, and pragmatic considerations, reveal that the conceptualization of the LEADER approach is really flexible, equivocal, ambiguous and highly influenced by internal (e.g. MLG, transnational cooperations) and external factors (e.g. better digital infrastructure connecting different localities to the extra-local). Therefore, any judgment (e.g. evaluation) of the LEADER approach must be always alarmed by its conceptual vagueness, ambiguity, multidimensionality, and context-dependency. This is not only for bottom-up principle. In addition, the same kind of critical inquiry can be extended to other LEADER features (e.g. innovation, cross-sectorial, cooperation) to undress the "constructed" characters of LEADER, and scrutinize its complex nature. For example, in regard to the innovation,

Dargan & Shucksmith (2008) challenge the innovative character of LEADER by investigating on the conceptual and practical mismatches about the concept of "innovation" occurring between different layers and level of the MLG (i.e. governmental and civil actors).

6.4. Typologies of activities

The previous sections have shed some critical reflections about the theory of change, the scale of its expected changes, and the overall methodological approach underlying the LEADER programme. In the mean while, it has been possible to get familiar with the heterogeneity of activities or projects supported by the LEADER programme. LEADER supports different kind of activities and projects: cultural events, music cooperations, animation and networking activities, cross-border exchange of practices and products, creation of innovation platform, and so on. Different data-bases and web-sites have been created to collect many of these experiences[7]. Although it might be obvious to conclude that there is a high heterogeneity in the typologies of activities, this section tries to look at such heterogeneity in a critical way, bringing into light the limited space of maneuver of LAGs when selected the projects, and focusing especially on the relationship between the project selection and the objectives of the Local Development Strategy, the Local Action Groups, and the larger EU and Regional/National Rural Development Programmes.

Going back to section 2.4, three types of programmes have been theorized: 1.) vision-driven; 2.) compliance, and 3.) emerging programmes. The differences from each other concern the extend to which the projects selected in the programme are dependent from internal (LDS and LAGs) and external (Regional/National and EU) visions, objectives, and rules. To put in other words, programmes change for the extend to which the selection of project is free to answer dynamic and emerging needs or opportunities which do not necessary have fit with stated objectives, rules, or visions (compliance or vision-driven). Referring to these three options, the question is: how to conceptualize LEADER in terms of typologies of activities? Is LEADER programme conceived to tackle the emerging circumstances and needs of rural communities, or is it rather planned to be bounded by the regulatory compliance or the stated vision of the LAGs, and their LDSs? A partial answer can be found in the Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013, which states that the selection of each LEADER projects must follow both the goals and vision of the LAGs (which are expressed in the LDS), as well as the target objectives and rules of the EU/National/Regional RDP. In fact, according to Article 34 of the same Regulation, Local Action Groups shall set up their LDS and "*ensure coherence […] when selecting operations* [referring to projects and activities]*, by prioritizing those operations according to their contribution to meeting that strategy's objectives and targets"*. Hence, the strategy, and its stated objectives defined once and for all the seven years of the programme period, guide and legitimize the selection of the activities and projects at LAG level, and with it, influences the heterogeneity and boundary of the programme itself. Moreover, the LDS is not a self-standing theory of change or a sink of rules and objectives defined by the LAG. Strategies, and the LAG itself are part of the larger institutional structure (the Multi-Level Governance) and mechanisms governing the LEADER programme. EU priorities or Regional strategies can interact and shape local priorities, and governmental requirements can also prevail over, as well as be passed by market opportunities or social movements (Barke & Newton, 1997). Activities and projects are not free from

[7] 1) http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leader2/action_innovante_search_js_enable.cfm?selected_lang=en;
2) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/en/leader/further-info

pre-fixed and stated visions written in formal documents, but actually influenced by the multiple institutional framings and structures varying across the Multi-level governance of LEADER. As Nemes et al., (2014), High & Nemes, (2007) and Saraceno, (1999) have pointed out, the dominance of certain institutional narratives and framings in LEADER can risk to limit or obstruct the bottom-up spirit, the idea of continuous transformation of places through activities, actions, and relations that emerge from the community and the territory, and not only from its formal regulatory setting (Dargan & Shucksmith, 2008; Goodwin, 1998). The request for matching the projects into a specific institutional framework (usually formal and bureaucratic) is particular important (see Figure 4), and the consequences in terms of heterogeneity are practical and tangible. Using the words of this manager:

"After so many years of LEADER, we receive increasingly restrictions from above. They ask us to narrow down our local development strategy around few specific territorial goals. We need to set up them at outset of the programming period. With these restrictions, we need to stick every choice to a strategy which cannot basically change for the next seven years. They tell you that you can change, but it is really difficult for us. I think this is absolutely against the bottom-up and area-based approach of LEADER. Everyday we encounter different opportunities from the territory, the situations change rapidly, and we discover new resources. I think that we need to exploit and account these opportunities, and to learn to adapt after every situation. But in the LEADER system as it is now, we cannot do it because everything we do must be in line with the goals of our strategy, plus with the goals of our National policy".

Figure 4: LAG matching activities into the Multi-Level Governance of LEADER

Source: own elaboration

7. The LEADER evaluation at LAG level: the intentions of the managers

In this section, the results collected from the interviews are displayed according to two principal lines of constructions and discourses emerged along the dialogues with the LAG managers. These two discourses are distinct, yet overarching to various degrees. This distinction is built in reference to two different ideas of local action group: the reflexive LAG and the auditing LAG, which will be explained later in the text. Rather than being a sharp categorization, this distinction among LAG is held only for analytical purposes, as well as to emphasises the contrast and differences between two alternative views on the utilization of LEADER evaluation. In fact, despite this divergence, it emerged that multiple values, topics, methods, and purposes overlap, migrate, or conflict with each other within and between the reflexive and the auditing LAG, thus suggesting that any efforts or attempts to standardize or generalise the approaches for guiding the LEADER evaluation are not free of values conflicts, ambiguity, deliberative and institutional positions, subjective interpretation, and interests at stake.

In order to simplify the messy and inconsistent scenario, the following findings are displayed on four key factors with which any approach to evaluation ought to deal with (Dahler-Larsen, 2011): 1) an evaluand or object of the evaluation, 2) some criteria and values based on which 3) a methodology to investigate or measure the performance of the evaluand, and finally 4) its purposes and intended uses. In disposing the findings on these four elements, the corollary of situational and institutional factors is exposed. Before starting to navigate on the results, some conceptual clarifications deserve to be accurately elucidated. While the intended uses have been largely explained previously in the text (see chapter 4.2), according to (Dahler-Larsen, 2011), the evaluation criteria represent the common, internationalised, and institutionalised yardsticks upon to which to the evaluand is evaluated, whilst the values refer to a category of fairly abstract concepts on what is considered as good or bad for the people touched by the programme intervention. Finally, the evaluand is meant as the object or the topic under evaluation (e.g. organization, partnership, programme, etc.), whist the methodology refers to the set of methods, timeline, and resources employed to undertake the evaluation exercise.

On the frontline of the right side, Johanna (gatekeeper) is introducing the researcher to the Local Action Group for the interview in Ērgļi, Latvia - 11 April 2016

LAG's chairman presenting his own livestock and farm in Rural Denmark – 28 May 2016

LAG manager presenting a LEADER project for facilitating disadvantaged people to bathe in Aalborg's see, Denmark – 31 May 2016

7.1. For what purposes do LAG managers intend to use the evaluation findings?

The results of the evaluation can be used for different purposes. Chapter 5.2 shows that the evaluation findings can be used for at least six *primary intended uses* (summative judgment, formative improvement and learning, accountability, monitoring, development, and knowledge generation). This section examines the responses of numerous LAG managers with regard to how they intend to use the evaluation findings. Among the six possible intended uses described previously, three have emerged inductively and deductively from the interviews conducted: *accountability, learning, and development*.

In contrast to accountability (the efficient use of resources to achieve results) and learning (understanding how to improve the programme), development is characterized by adaptation and change in a complex and dynamic system (a continuous response to a changing environment). While accountability and learning are expressed by all LAG managers (in different ways and to different degrees), the explication of the last one is rather exceptional (only one manager exhibited this feature in a predominant manner). This developmental intention is displayed for its distinct character among the majority of the cases in which the managers attempted to attain both accountability and learning. However, it should be noted that some elements of this third purpose (developmental) were manifested in many retroactive questions raised by the managers during and after the interviews, suggesting that this exceptional character could be implicit among many of the LAG managers.

Based on the extent to which managers have expressed and supported the three primary intentions of the use of the evaluation findings, three kinds of LAGs have been modelled: the *accountability* LAG, *the learning LAG*, and the *developmental LAG*. The findings of this study have therefore been organized around these three forms of LAGs. It should be noted that despite the demarcation of these three models, each LAG appears to have traces of multiple elements of each of the three purposes, accountability, learning, and development, shading each interview. For the purpose of this study distinguishing the three kinds of LAG, the prevailing or primary purposes reported during the interviews, as well as the supporting arguments and factors used to explain them (e.g. lack of staff capacity, political pressure, internal resistance among board members) were employed as codes for the purpose of analytical distinction. Due to the fact that these purposes often overlap, such models should be seen primarily as analytical lenses rather than a strict categorization of the LAGs. The results of these interviews are presented in the following order: the accountability LAG, the learning LAG, and the developmental LAG.

7.1.1. The accountability LAG

Accountability and learning, two purposes whose differing connotations are often seen in tensions and contrasting in the literature and to practitioners: one for counting and demonstrating results, and the other for improving the programme (I Guijt, 2010). For the purpose of this analysis it should be clarified with strong emphasis that the managers of the accountability LAG are far from being blind or disinterested to any learning or improvements. The primary intention of being accountable should not be confused with a lack of constructive attitude, which instead has jumped out and crossed the all the managers who, during the interviews, have shown to be keen and willing to engage themselves in the process of continuous learning and improvement for both their territory and their professional

work. All managers in fact exhibited an interests in gaining new information and seemed far from precluding learning from accountability.

However, what was unique in this specific sample of seven managers interviewed was the special concern, direction, and devotion given to the measurement and demonstration of the LDS's achievements. The main purpose attached to the evaluation of LEADER in this cluster of managers has been the commitment and objective of making their LAG more "accurately" accountable to their stakeholders in terms of performance in procedures and results of the LDS. This can be clearly detected in the following responses:

> LAG11*: "Evaluation is a continuous process of showing what LAGs have achieved in the LDS and what they are doing for the territory."*
>
> LAG8*: "LAGs are an accountable body, thus the evaluation is to show that they are effective and efficient."*
>
> LAG7*: "Evaluation should check and show if the strategy is producing its expected achievements, and if resources are spent efficiently and coherently with the strategy."*

If a line should be drawn through this cluster of managers, it would indicate that the primary intended use of the accountability LAG is to establish that everything produced and processed by the LAG should be passed under the lenses of their stakeholders from different institutional layer and level: funders, citizens or not beneficiaries, LAG's service users or beneficiaries, local and regional policy makers. When questioned about to whom do they intend to make their evaluation findings accountable, a long and broad list of stakeholders was mentioned, without discerning a specific role for them. A deep breath followed the question, and opened the dance to a long list of stakeholders. Although these managers were divided between those who mainly referred to the upper stakeholders (policy-makers and funders), and those who extended the list to local stakeholders (the community as whole), the main element common among them was the passive role as "information recipients" given to the stakeholders. In order to make the evaluation findings more useful, these actors should receive any possible valuable evidence about the LAG's or LDS' performance.

> In the words of LAG7: *"stakeholders should get precisely and concretely informed about how the strategy is moving towards its implementation. Not only the local, but also the national and regional politicians should be informed about how we create territorial governance with LEADER"*
>
> And
>
> LAG12: *"Evaluation is to show to the community that the LAG has worked and produced results for the whole territory".*

Other reasons were explained by the managers of the accountability LAG with regard to the utility of the evaluation: e.g. to monitor and report achievements, to increase ownership of data, to support

and inform joint decisions about the future of the local development strategy, etc. Moreover, for this group of managers, the utility of the LEADER evaluation seemed to be strongly linked with the amount and the quality of findings that make them accountable to their stakeholders (funders, the community, the internal staff and members). In fact, managers of the accountability LAG were quite adamant about the collection and provision of evidence, even for those intangible, ambiguous, and often indefinable outcomes of LEADER. When asked whether they wanted to increase the utility of the evaluation,

> LAG7 stated*: "We want to show that we have improved the quality of life in rural area. We want that evaluation measures these kind changes occurred in the single people and in the whole territory, and not only how many job have been created".*

In this cluster of managers, even the most qualitative interactions between the LAG work and its territory was supposed to be converted into, and thus evaluated for its accountable units. For example, animation activities, networking events, cooperation, advisory services, capacity building events, and every project were demanded to be made accountable for the main purpose of evaluation, in terms of both their content and merits. Process-oriented indicators were acclaimed, and intangible results such as building collective trust or cultural change in rural areas were asked to be made accountable, assuming them as computable and reportable to all.

> As LAG7 explained: *"When we have set up this information system [to collect inputs, outputs, and outcomes], we had so many problems in expressing cultural heritage in the form of indicators. We had so many internal and long discussions about what does cultural heritage mean. It means everything to everybody. So, we decided that we had to build a common understanding in our LAG board. Of course, they [referring to the members of the LAG board] can have their own views and opinions, but if we don't have a common understanding, we cannot evaluate which project is eligible and coherent with the goal of our strategy. Everybody should know what kind of projects contribute mostly to our strategy. We need to make an agreement on its meaning at least within the context of our local development strategy. And we need to know what are the outcomes of this meaning".*

This case shows, counting the outcomes seems to be what mostly counts, and knowledge conflicts about the meaning of what is counted can put the utility of the evaluation exercise at risk of becoming erroneous. After the presentation of the information systems, lists of indicators, and streamlined procedures for collecting data, the relevance of these accountability procedures was questioned during the interview. When asked to give an opinion about the utility of their accountability procedures, one of the most representative answers given by a LAG was:

> LAG7: *"if you can measure something, you can manage it. This is the thought behind our rural management…I think this system [referring to a newly established IT system to collect, monitor, and report on achievements] is a positive learning for all the community. I expect that all the community can take the results of our evaluation and learn from it".*

Not surprisingly, these managers explained that the intentions of accounting for everything that is possible to be accounted for becomes more relevant if complemented by a formative side of evaluation. For example, after having confirmed that the primary purpose of evaluation is to measure and show the performance of the LDS to a wide range of stakeholders, this manager lamented:

> LAG11: *"We want to know if what we are collecting makes sense, and if the indicators show what we are producing. This means that every year we need to review the indicators otherwise we risk to come up with pointless conclusions".*

If accountability is to be the primary intended purpose of this cluster, and exploring the factors leading to their results seems to be secondary, what makes these managers refrain (to some extent) from using evaluation – for example - for learning? Some exemplary answers are collected in the following responses:

> LAG11: *"I think that the discourse at national ministry level is only about how many jobs has the LEADER programme created. That's all. They are not interested at all in learning how to make the programme better, how can we empower people, or how do we work with the community. Does the number of jobs created say everything? What about the living conditions in rural areas? So why should I be looking for more than the job we have created? I am the LAG. I am the manager, the director. I am the secretary. I am the animator. I control the economics. I control all the communication, Facebook, and website. One person. That's all. I don't have time for doing more." The manager continued: "we have so many projects to deliver, and we don't have the time to go back and see what works and what does not in our projects. We just need to rush, and to implement them".*

> LAG9: *"After the last programme period, the agricultural lobbies attacked the LEADER programme in the Parliament and on many newspapers. We were accused of being ineffective in creating new jobs and adding little value for the rural development. They claimed that LEADER is useful only for singing happily in rural areas, or making swimming pools in the farms. To defend ourselves from these attacks, we needed results and evidence. So, now we are going to be more organized in collecting evidence and I think we need to make better our lobby machine otherwise LEADER will be completely cut-off".*

> LAG 10: *"Even if the regulation allows us to change the local development strategy, we are not interested in discovering why it is working or not, and how we can improve it, because practically it is difficult to change it."*

> LAG12: *"Our LAG could be stronger. True. For example, we have a big challenge; to bring the rights for equal opportunity directly in place in our LAG. We used to have an ok amount, in terms of women and men. But since the new programme period, this inequality got crazy. I am the only woman in the LAG. I think that all the LEADER system is getting more and more bureaucratic, and all the power to share do not appeal to women anymore. It does not appeal to young people too. It appeals only to men, who are used to be sitting in a board, bringing their*

own friends, and agree on what they usually want to do. I think that our LAG is a really man-made system right now. I really don't know how to challenge this system. It is difficult for me to bring this discussion into place."

This set of quotes differ in the explanations of the situational factors within the context in which the evaluation will take place, but coincide with the idea that the evaluation of LEADER could potentially attend other purposes and uses, but the primary one is to accomplish the accountability premises. To sum up all these responses, the primary intended use of the managers of the accountability LAG is oriented to measure and show the performance of the strategy to an extensive group of actors. While formative purposes of evaluation have been presented as relevant they are often considered secondary.

In the next section, the analysis describes how the learning LAG distinguishes itself, starting from partially discarding the idea that the LDS can be accurately measured, controlled, and steered, and how the reporting of the achievements can give little contribution to improvements. In the learning LAG, the answer of the managers indicates that *how* and *why*-like questions are considered more relevant and useful than those addressed at measuring the performance of the strategy or the LAG in relation to a predefined theoretical or planned model described in the strategy.

6.1.2. The Learning LAG

This section will begin with the assessment of the similarities with the previous cluster. The five managers of the *learning LAG* considered it necessary to undertake evaluation for accountability purposes, especially for increasing transparency in public expenditures aimed at the local community and the funders, as well as to comply with the national or regional evaluation requests. In contrast to the previous cluster, managers of the learning LAG were united by the claim that accountability is quite limited when it comes to supporting and improving LAG operations, and believe instead that something more useful should be pursued through evaluation. This can be observed through the responses of two LAG managers.

LAG3: *"When we count what you have achieved, it is like a mirror. We can see ourselves in front of the mirror, and then what? What can we do with this picture? Especially when this picture comes too late, what is the purpose of evaluation?"*

LAG5 explained: *"When I was hired as manager during the end of the last programme period, I realized that the LAG was a disaster [referring to the performance of the strategy]. I started to investigate what were the things that worked well and those that worked bad. I went through all the projects. All 50 of them. I looked at how well they were managed by the LAG in terms of administration, quality of advisory services, fulfilment of legislative requirement, etc. I looked at their technical workout in relation with the achievements of the projects and I finally realized that in the really problematic projects, there is a lot of money involved. I went even deeper to search for the reasons of the problems, and I discovered that in these problematic projects there were a lot of municipalities involved, trying to get as much benefit as possible from LEADER. They [the municipalities] invented some projects, and delegated their implementation to people who were not interested at all, who were only ordered to implement the project, who were not*

as passionate as those directly receiving small amounts of money. We tried to change our minimum budget to grants but the national government did not allow us. They also asked to increase. But at least, I know what is the problem now. This is the kind of evaluation that we value more".

Moreover, besides the different level of importance shown for exploring what works well or what works poorly, this cluster of managers exposed two additional differences in respect to the accountability LAG. Firstly, the long and extensive mix of stakeholders receiving the evaluation findings is now replaced by the intention to involve only specific actors, which could have a more proactive role. Rather than just communicating the evaluation findings, the purpose of the evaluation is to involve the actors that have links and previous experiences with the LAG or LEADER-like programmes, or whose own skills and knowledge impact the learning process. The main actors mentioned are the beneficiaries and other LAGs from different geographical areas or from the same region, as well as other local development practitioners. Funders, policy-makers, or researchers were often discredited because they were seen as being too distant and sophisticated in their language use, methods of work, and solutions; hence they were considered unsuitable for evaluating local development. Moreover, this cluster was marked by the sort of business-client model as often displayed in the interviews. As such, the idea that ordinary citizens or non-beneficiary should be made accountable, or that their involvement should be part of the LAG learning process, was shunned, as seen in the following statements from managers:

LAG4: *"I don't get why LAGs should make so much noise in the community with our little LEADER programme. People are so brainwashed by everyday messages and advertisings. I prefer to talk with my stakeholders, ask them to give feedback after every workshop or event, and integrate their feedbacks in our work".*

LAG5: *"In our country, we have big companies that make the evaluation, we have Universities, researchers, etc. They come here once in a while, ask for data for a couple of days, make some statistics for us, and that's all. I think that they might know more than us about the evaluation, but they are not used to our basic work or LEADER. Once, they said that to be more effective, our LAG should support strong and big companies. Can you imagine that for rural development? It is unbelievable. So, it is good to know that some outsiders think that we have succeeded in the strategy, but then, does it really help us to improve the quality of the work? Isn't it better to involve those actors that know the basics, the simple things of our work? It is really difficult to involve the right people in evaluation [continuing about the involvement of the community for the evaluation] I think that people are not interested in our findings. People are only interested when there is money to be spent...83% of our members are normal people and the rest of the membership is made by public and private organizations. The people cannot receive any funds, and neither can the organizations get grants from us. The Ministry decided that we have to have as much members as possible. But what can these members get from us? Nothing. We can't give them money just because they are members. Why shall we invite them in the evaluation? What can we give to them? The evaluation findings? Is that all?".*

A second major difference with the accountability LAG concerns the perspective of the management of the LEADER strategy. Managers of the learning LAG showed to be fully convinced that the LDS cannot be steered towards a pre-defined plan and set of goals. Insecurity and distrust were attached to the traditional way of linear planning and evaluation. Evaluation procedures aiming at measuring the LDS' performance for the scope of improving its impacts were indicated as limited in providing inputs or follow-up recommendations. As these quotes indicate:

> LAG5: *"You make a plan and it goes somewhere else. You try to fulfil the plan, but the world is changing all the time, and actually you find something that we did not think to have some years ago. And now the plan is old. What I am more interested in, first of all, is to understand how well our LEADER group works. I mean, the work of the people in our organization".*

> LAG4: *"We cannot control the strategy, but we can improve ourselves".*

> LAG3: *"We want to understand the problems of delivering and realizing projects in order to overcome them".*

More than the improvement of the strategy, managers of the learning LAG repeatedly emphasized and expressed the need to use evaluations for the purpose of identifying and correcting the pitfalls, as well as understanding the successful factors along the development process carried out by the LAG. For example, as reported here:

> LAG4*: "We participated in a pilot evaluation financed by the National Government. We could hire a consultant to assess ourselves and guide us in organizing the meetings better, distributing the power between the LAG board and staff, providing better services to the applicants, facilitating the decisions during the meetings, and improving our organizational efficiency. And this was very very useful for us".*

For the majority of these managers, the formative purpose was often the primary focus because of their need to be supported by the evaluation (rather than constrained by it) in making quick and rapid decisions, improving the staff's skills and capacities, and making managerial corrections to the way of working. To be more precise, the intentions of this cluster of managers appears to be more inclined to improve the LAG as organizational entity that performs the LDS rather than improving the strategy itself. As the following quotes suggests:

> LAG3: *"It would be really useful if somebody could tell us that how can make our work more efficient, how can we communicate more effectively with the partners, and make our group working more productively".*

> LAG2: *"I think that the evaluation should aim to improve the skills of the LAG. It should challenge us in working better for our territory. The evaluation should lead to new actions, otherwise it is a useless exercise".*

LAG5: *"There are so many problems in our LAG. The staff of the LAG has too much knowledge about the projects, about all the work behind LEADER, and about the quality of our applicants. But we do not decide anything. The members of the LAG board decide for us. They just come here to decide about something that they don't know anything about. They [members of the board] don't even know each other properly to make joint decisions. It would be much more useful to make an evaluation focused on these problems, so we can improve the work of our board".*

Summarizing these findings, the primary intended use of evaluation in the learning LAG starts from the expectations and conviction of the managers to commit themselves to an intense accountability marathon. Especially when evaluation is merely for descriptive purposes (e.g. to what extend have the LDS goals been achieved?), this cluster of managers believes that the only function of accountability is to mirror a situation which adds little in terms of insights, tips, and lessons for improvement. Consequently, evaluation is seen as more useful when searching for the pitfalls and profitable opportunities along the implementation of the strategy, or when it pursues a problem solving nature, tackles internal challenges, and ultimately it suggests actions for improving the LAG and its LDS.

In the next section, the responses of one single manager is described for its distinct and remarkable intention. In the developmental LAG, the focus of the evaluation goes beyond the boundaries of positive improvement of the LAG and its LDS. The main purpose of evaluation is still adaptation. It seems that this manager was more interested into exploring what is it going on in the rural community, what are the new sectors and economies, what are the possible funds to get if LEADER be cut off? The main focus seems to shift from a solely internal learning and view to the external interactions with and within the LAGs outside environment. Although this king of focus and purposes have emerged occasionally in the questions raised by the other managers during the interviews, in the developmental LAG, it appears that evaluation serves to explore what is going on around the LAG (e.g. new fund opportunities, new networks with which the LAG should be in tune with), and thus to help the LAG to adapt and respond to challenges and changes in their dynamic environment.

6.1.3. The Developmental LAG

For the manager of the developmental LAG (LAG6), the discourse about the purposes of the LEADER evaluation starts from a particular framing of the LEADER programme described at the beginning of the interview:

LAG6: *"I conceive LEADER as a programme to stimulate innovation in rural areas. We are trying to turn our rural development into a more bio-based, green programme. It is a big challenge. We need to work even outside the LEADER programme. We try to animate the territory as whole".*

LAG6: *"LEADER is about innovation and valorising new niches…there are so many international rules or opportunities around us, which sometimes are not suitable or achievable for our initiatives…I need evaluation to know these rules, and if necessary, to overcome them. I'll tell you: our LAG is a little bit anarchic".*

In this frame, the intentions underlined by this manager seem to be related to the use of evaluation as a tool for *"adapting the LAG to new rules*, *to discover what the opportunities and constraints are, and when adaptation is not possible, to use evaluation for to be anarchic"*. As this manager explained:

> LAG6: *"I work almost alone in the LAG, and I need to know what is going on around me. I need to use evaluations to explore new sectors, and to find new rural actors. I need to know other solutions to get this place more attractive and to keep the young population in rural areas".*

Moreover, compared to the previous two clusters of managers, the developmental LAG emphasised a specific preoccupation for other alternative uses of the evaluation findings, referring to those mechanisms that have been used by Managing Authorities to penalize, or even refuse to acknowledge, the risks and failures stemming from innovative initiatives promoted by LEADER. Following the intentions of this manager, the purpose of the evaluation is oriented at assessing the outside system to LEADER, to screen and explore the changing rules, fund opportunities, market and environmental trends around the LAG (EU Regulation, new international markets or legislations, changes in the demography of the rural population) in order foster adaptation and innovation. As indicated by

> LAG6: *"Evaluation should help me to be innovative. It should focus at promoting the innovations, and to achieve more results from animation, networking, and cooperation with the stakeholders".*

As introduced in the beginning of the chapter, elements of the developmental LAG were not exclusively mentioned by this manager. While this manager was exceptional in manifesting this specific intention quite explicitly and repeatedly throughout the interview, similar cues of developmental purposes were dispersed among the conversations with other managers from the other LAG clusters (especially when the recorder was off). Maybe, more time for the interviews could have revealed more explicitly that the spirit of the developmental LAG is a quite common intention for the LEADER evaluation. However, so far, it appeared only tacitly, maybe unconsciously, in many other managers, so as it was expressed in several unstructured questions posed to the researcher about, for example, EU legislation and perspectives about LEADER, migration and demographic issues, or any other factors that might have multi-casual linkages or unexpected relationships with the strategy pursued by the LAG. For example:

> LAG11: *"We have problems with the EU legislation about public procurements. It is really impossible for us to support small projects using local resources when the tendering rules have to comply with the free-market legislation. How does it work in other countries? How can it be possible to support small initiatives or the area-based approach when these rules allow international entrepreneurs to apply for the calls of proposals issued by our LAG? I have the feeling that we are the only ones in EU that are suffering from these rules".*

LAG7: *"…young people are almost impossible to reach. We have tried to involve them in so many ways, but without producing long lasting results. We were thinking to create a committee for them inside our board but we are not sure that this idea will solve the problem. Do you have any other examples to attract young people in LEADER evaluation? Shall we attract them by giving them a special budget or task, or maybe these are not the main issues to tackle? I have the impression that they are not interested in taking decisions for the territory at that age. Maybe they want to travel and go study somewhere else. Is it the same in your country? Or maybe the problem is that LEADER looks too bureaucratic for them?"*

To summarize, the results of this chapter have shown three key purposes of the managers with regard to the LEADER evaluation at the LAG level. In the case of the accountability LAG, managers show a predominant interest in measuring their performance, and providing evidences to a large range of stakeholders about the strategy achievements. The managers of the learning LAG, instead, convey the impression that the primary purpose of accountability is minimized in order to give more priority to the formative purpose of understanding what works and does not work in the LAG, and ultimately improve its quality and outcomes. Finally, in the developmental LAG, the goal of the evaluation is not to improve the LAG internally or for the betterment of the strategy's performance, but, given the innovative nature with which the LEADER initiative is understood, the primary purpose of the evaluation findings should aim to support the LAG in being more adaptive and responsive to its dynamic environment. In the developmental LAG, evaluation seems to be looking constructively at the larger system surrounding the LAG, and taking lessons and inputs from it, while promoting any attempts to make changes in local development.

7.2. For which purposes do LAG managers intend to use the evaluation process?

In this section, two distinct elements of the utilization-focused approach to evaluate LEADER at LAG level are dealt with in conjunction: 1.) the examination of differing uses for the evaluation process 2.) the suggested methods, which complement these uses. Both elements were expressed and linked together by the managers interviewed. Most of the methods expressed represent applied experiences of the LAGs. The reason for displaying these two elements together is because, quite often these topics came up together during the interviews. Staying focused on utilization, when asked how they intended to use the process of evaluation, managers replied providing previous or future methodological examples of high relevance, and explained the positive outcomes in which they are interested in. In this interplay between process use and examples of relevant evaluation methods, the present section shows how managers value and conceive the process of evaluation. Before digging into the answers, some conceptual clarifications are elucidated in order to facilitate the presentation and understanding of the following results.

Evaluation methods are the analytical tools to process the data for the evaluation (OECD, 2010). They are the *know-how,* the tool to collect, process, and interpret the information, data, knowledge handled during the evaluation process (Dahler-Larsen, 2011). Methods have more than a technical dimension (e.g. qualitative vs quantitative, mixed methods, sample size, reliability, validity, credibility). Patton (2009) argues that reducing the discussion on the methods as something purely technical, is akin to implying that methods imply arbitrary decisions, conflicting interests, value preferences, and resource-allocation priorities. Moreover, decisions about methods have direct links

and consequences over the utilization of evaluation (Patton, 2008). While methods are the know-how (i.e. tools), the process uses of the evaluation are defined as the individual or collective changes (i.e. outcomes) that could occur in the actors (e.g. organization, citizen, entrepreneur, association) engaged along the process of evaluation (Patton 2008, p. 155). Put differently, it represents the outcomes achieved through the engagement in the evaluation practice (e.g. deciding the methods to be use, interpret conclusions, engage in constructive dialogue). Patton (2008) listed at least six possible intended process uses of evaluations (see Chapter 5.2); some of them emerged directly from the intentions of the managers, while others were used to stimulate the managers to think about the inherent outcomes of the LEADER evaluation, and understand their intentions from these reactions.

The overall finding collected through the answers indicates a common appreciation of the managers with regard to the value of the evaluation process; a common pattern which, however, was intended in different ways, as the following text shows. With few exceptions, the managers interviewed have recognized and explained through different examples the ways with which the exercise of the LEADER evaluation can turn into a beneficial business. It is exactly this higher interest and willingness to use the evaluation primary for its process rather than for canonical production of findings (e.g. showing programme effectiveness & efficiency) that merits to be remarked here. Indeed, when explaining how they intend to make a more valuable use of the evaluation at LAG level, quite often the managers started by indicating their interests towards the process rather than its finding. In the words of LAG5's: "*the process of the evaluation matters more than its findings*". To disentangle this general overview and make it clearer, this section starts begins with those intentions most commonly expressed by the managers to 1.) support or reinforce the programme intervention, followed by 2.) the developing of further actions and new plans; 3.) engaging the local community; 4.) engaging the LAG in the evaluation thinking; and finally to 5.) increasing the responsiveness and problem solving of the LAG.

Starting from the first point, several managers advised that the process of the evaluation should aim at producing and supporting collaborations and networking between the LAGs and their local actors, or between the LAGs and other actors from different geographical areas (e.g. other LAGs). A large group of managers explained that the usefulness of the evaluation come up when it leads to surprising outcomes generated by fostering meetings with and among local experts, by engaging the members of the LAG in challenging and critical discussion (with local stakeholders or with other LAGs), and by embracing new actors from the outside world of local development into the evaluation process, in order to help the LAG in reaching its desired goals. As this quote explains:

> LAG7: *"Some years ago, we organized some seminars, conferences and survey for our stakeholders to evaluate the local resources available in our territory. We wanted to exploit our local food system. After that, the stakeholders started to think about the resources they had in hand, and about all the opportunities they had to make some business. They started to be more aware of their assets, and start to contribute more to our strategy. They felt more encouraged. I think this is really useful for us. For example, thanks to these kinds of evaluations, many people acknowledged the existence of a local food network in our territory. We did evaluation study tours and workshops about this food network and people got so interested that finally we established an NGO for it. In the beginning, there were 30 producers joining the NGO but after*

5 years, this network has grown to more than 100 producers…I think this network has grown because we gave this information out, we brought people together, and so on".

As shown in this and other examples, some managers have revealed to value more evaluation when its process supports or reinforces the programme intervention, increases the expected outcomes, and multiples the delivery of projects and ideas to achieve their expected goals. In addition, as the next record suggests, evaluation is highly valued not only when it enables LAGs to reach the designed impacts or results of the strategy, but even when its process helps to *2.) develop further actions and new plans* (e.g. Local Development Strategy*)*.

LAG4: *"At the end of the last programme period, we [the LAG manager and a colleague] went to visit some groups of LEADER projects outside our LAG. We travelled all around our country. We visited something like 120 projects in 5 different municipalities. We prepared a list of evaluation questions leading our visits there, and we had really interesting discussions with the people, with the experts in the field. For me it is more vivid and understandable when I see something. We made reports after every visits. We saw what was good, and what we could do in future. It was the best process of the evaluation in the previous LEADER programme because we could meet the real people, discuss with them, and evaluate together. We made so many connections with people, and we invited them to present their projects in our LAG. They came here in front of our stakeholders. We had this exchange of knowledge, and finally we used them to build our new strategy together. We made this process interwoven with the development of the new local strategy. We did the new action plan together with this process of evaluation. Without so much speaking and meeting, without so much travelling, we could not have such great suggestions and insights. We spent a lot of time for doing this, but finally we gained a lot. We could see already the results of other experiences, and take the lessons from them. We could touch what was really good. We even realized what we did wrong in our previous strategy. We could visualize the things realized, and we could integrate them in our strategy".*

Another kind of intended use emerged from three managers who expressed the need to *3.) engage the local community* (beneficiaries or not) into the evaluation process. Especially with regard to the process use, managers have manifested two contrasting and opposite views. On one hand, for some managers, the evaluation is useful when it gathers different people together (beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, members and no-members, LAGs from the same country with others from other countries), and allows them to meet eyeball to eyeball, discuss, work together, to finally to appreciate an exchange of values, ideas, and knowledge, especially by including those actors who are usually left out by the decision making processes or collective actions, e.g. young people, children, specific gender groups (women in highly masculinized rural areas). For examples:

LAG1: *"It is really relevant for us to work together with the children. We had some projects with the children coming from all our territory; we had questionnaires, seminars, and workshops with them. Children represented a new audience for us. They represented the part of the community which will use the results of our strategy in the future, so it is important for us to ask their opinion. Nobody has ever asked them what do they want, and how do they see our*

territory…We brought them out to the see some LEADER projects, to visit the main resources and assets of our place, and they learned a lot about their territory. Then, we asked to the children to paint drawings about our territory, and to make future models. We asked them what did they evaluate more in the project and the places they have seed. And some children painted a river, other the people, other the food, etc. The results were striking. We got many paradoxical results, and interesting insights from which we adults have learned a lot".

LAG11: *"I hired a company specialized in participatory methods because I believe that evaluation should be done together with the people. We launched a participatory evaluation project called: who participate cares. We have unfolded already four stages of this project. In the first one, we involved the community for doing a contextual analysis. We asked them what happened in the last programme period. We did it in order to start a joint discussion with the LAG and the territory. Secondly, we did a SWOT analysis with all the community. Thirdly, we implemented the EASW methodology [i.e. European Awareness Scenario Workshop], and concluded the project with the METAPLAN in order to understand the community needs, and develop new actions for answering to them. After these stages, we will reflect together about this process, and see what we have achieved. But I think that whatever the result is, we need to do these bottom-up evaluation approaches otherwise we cannot stimulate all the people in the territory. I hope that through evaluation we can build a sense of civil engagement, public trust, and collective responsibility".*

Seven managers have expressed little utility from extending the process of evaluation to actors who they do not share any stakes with, or have little knowledge about LEADER or the LAG itself. These managers were less convinced that evaluation should engage actors who have little to do with LEADER. As this quotes indicate:

LAG4: *"I don't really understand why LAGs should make so much noise in the territory. I don't think we should bother people who have little interest in LEADER evaluation. They work hard all the day, and they don't have time, information, they are not interested in giving feedbacks to us. We have tried to involve them more, but people don't come. For us, it is difficult to have feedbacks from regular people, [referring to those who have not applied for projects], because not everybody knows what LEADER is about. There is not so much sense in engaging regular people just for the purpose of doing a participatory evaluation. It is much better if the organizations who received funds from us could in turn evaluate more with the people they have targeted, but for me, when thinking about engaging people, it is more useful if we could help them to build a strategic thinking rather than bother them with evaluation questionnaires".*

Another kind of process use emerged from a group of managers who wanted to use evaluation to *4.) engage the LAG in the evaluation thinking*. In this group of managers, evaluation seems to find its utility when the process helps the stakeholders of the LAG (some mentioned members of the board, or staff of the LAG, or specific target group) to commit themselves to working better, creating a common understanding about the LAG's vision and its LDS, to search for managerial and technical

problems, to propose and incorporate solutions, or to resolve internal resistance for changes in the way of working. Using the managers' words,

> LAG3: *"In the last programme period we did an intra-LAG peer evaluation. The managers of our neighbouring LAG and I exchanged and crossed our work. We visited some of the projects realized by the other LAG, and we evaluated the quality of services provided by the LAG. Then, we analysed the results of the questionnaire, and we presented the conclusions in front of the board of the other LAGs. We did this in order to bring an external view into the LAG everyday working activities. This was a very useful practice because many pitfalls and hidden problems were identified and come forth, and new actions were suggested to improve the LAG. This was really useful for us because the members of the board could start to be more open and willing to listen. It was an ice-braking. They trusted more an external actor. When you are an outsider but you are working in the same kind of programme, the LAG board is much more opened to listening and change, especially if you give them constructive feedbacks".*

> LAG5: *"Last year, we did a developmental day about the evaluation findings and fictions. The fictions were even more important than the findings. For example, we used to hire an expert for leading the fictions in the developmental day. Once, the expert was an art therapist who helped us to analyse the quality of work in the board, the feelings and beliefs of the members about each other, etc. Another time, we had an expert doing social drama. In social drama we played fictions about good and bad meetings, we painted drawings, we made role play to exchange the role of each other. We did outdoor activities together, with a lot of problem solving tasks and joint discussion about the quality of the projects, and we had to work always as a group. The main point of these fictions is exactly to get our members of the LAG board more active, interested, and engaged in the strategy. It is not just sitting in a room, and hearing somebody's speech. It is not just somebody who presents the results, everybody like his/her speech, and finally they just go home. The purpose of this day is to evaluate the strategy and the work of the LAG in a really interactive and productive setting. The fictions are important to improve the working skills and spirit of the group. We should acknowledge that the members of the board are kind of strangers. They turn over every year, and they don't always know each other. They need to trust each other otherwise decisions, plans, evaluation become more difficult. So this developmental day is for both. It concerns facts because we discuss about the things we managed and achieved during the working year, about the problems we have faced, and about what should be removed. Then, we have these fictions to help us to work better together as group, to engage us in jointly solving the problems that we found in the findings".*

To add new elements in this multi-faceted picture, other managers indicated that the purpose of the evaluation process is to *5.) increase responsiveness and problem solving of the LAG* in order to perform the strategy better. Examples of methods correlated to this purpose were the setting up and management of an internal information system to increase rapid monitoring and the ownership of *in-house* data (LAG7: "*if we own the data, we can improve the control and steering of the LDS*"); the establishment of networking-based online platform in which the managers of LAGs can ask any kind of questions, report problems, communicate positive experiences, and rapidly get new insights on

how to improve the LAG's work and strategy, or finally the setting-up of specific thematic groups in which a mixture of different actors (e.g. farmers, policy-makers, students) focus and commit themselves to study a specific topic in the local development. As indicated by LAG8: "*we invite a mix of experts and ordinary citizen to form a citizen's jury, and we appoint them for being constantly focused about the development and evaluation of a specific issue, as for example innovation, food, social agriculture*".

Table 4 summarizes the main intended process uses, and presents some of the exemplary methods mentioned by the managers for realizing them. When reading the table, it should be kept in mind that the links made between the methods and the process uses have been displayed according to the managers' responses, which do not exclude the presence of multiple or alternative relations between the methods and process outcomes.

Table 3: Intended purposes of the managers about the LEADER evaluation process uses and methods

Intended purposes of the evaluation process uses	***Example of methods related to the intended process use***
(1) Support the performance and the (2) development of the local development strategy	• Workshop tours, evaluation study visits, and exchange of project results among LAGs from different areas; • Methods fostering the interactions and collections of ideas from new actors, programmes, and sectors;
(3) Increasing community engagement in the local development strategy and LAG's work	• "Who participate matters" (project based on several participatory tools: METAPLAN, EASW, SWOT); • Workshops with children (painting and storytelling to express their views on the assets of the territory and the LAG projects).
(4) Engage the LAG into the evaluation thinking	• Developmental day based on evaluation facts and fictions to reflect on the evaluation and monitoring's findings, and improve the group work and spirit in the LAG board to make further actions; • Peer-evaluation of projects between managers from two or more LAGs (i.e. for cross-evaluating the quality of work of the other LAG).
(5) Increase the responsiveness and problem solving capacity of the LAG	• Computer-based systems to constantly and rapidly control and steer the LAG performance; • LAG-based network or on-line platform supporting the managers for sharing problems, solutions, and new insights for improving the LAG, and its local development strategy • Citizen's jury

7.3. Which evaluation criteria and values do LAG managers intend to use?

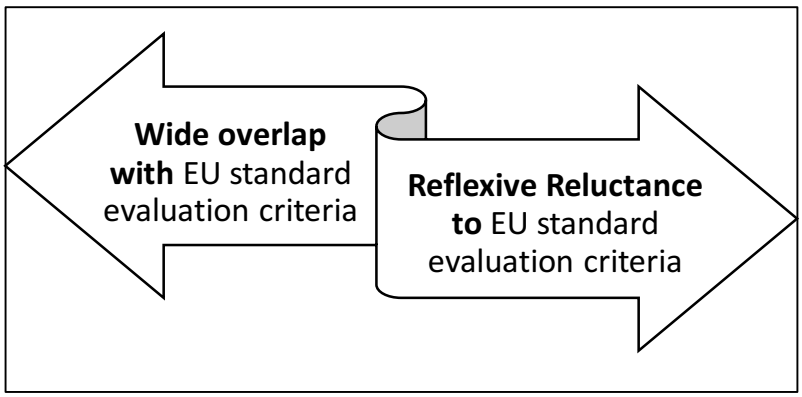
As in other part of this chapter, the scope of this section is to identify particular intentions of managers, to discriminate and maximise differences and similarities among them, and to identify clusters of similar intended uses among managers. In this specific section, the focus is on the evaluation criteria and values. These two elements are dealt in two distinct parts and summarised in

Figure 5 and 6. In relation to the criteria of evaluation, Figure 5 shows two extreme stances between which managers have positioned themselves. On the one hand, there are the LAG managers who found useful to carry out the evaluation based on a criteria which *widely overlap* with those of the EU - i.e. effectiveness, efficiency, impact, coherence, and added value (European Commission, 2015). On the other hand, there are the managers who manifested a sort of *reflexive reluctance* to the same criteria, in particular to those of effectiveness and efficiency. In this sort of reflexive reluctance, LAG managers did seem to escape from being effective and efficient, but they expressed concerns about their side effects (the trade-off between efficiency and innovative experiments). With concern for the use of evaluation values, Fig. Y shows three different patterns in the manager's responses to the values of the community or the LAG's partners (*emancipatory value-committed use*); those who found it more influential to rely on neutral, objective, and standard values (*analytical value-neutral use*), and those who are inclined to have an openness to any values, as long as dialogue and social learning is encouraged (*value-critical use*). In the following parts, the results are further explicated.

7.3.1. Evaluation criteria in LEADER

Evaluation criteria is defined as the standard against which the performance, the worthiness, or the value of a programme is assessed (Dahler-Larsen, 2011, p. 73; OECD, 2010). Within the broad ecosystem of the evaluation, criteria circulates like pollen, cross-contaminating organizations and evaluation procedures through the means of consultants, regulations, and guidelines (Dahler-Larsen, 2011). In this section, the criteria intended to be used by the managers are displayed, and two differing core patterns are explicated: a wide overlap with EU standard criteria (efficiency, effectiveness, impact, coherence, added value) and a reflexive reluctance to the same (Figure 5). The two patterns distinguish themselves for the degree of acceptance and complicity of the managers with the use of EU standard evaluation criteria. In the case of wide overlap, it should be remarked that the managers did not necessarily limit their evaluation to them, however, compared to the cases of reflexive reluctance, this group of 5 managers showed to follow, incorporate, and make the best use of these standards. On the opposite side, managers showing a reflexive reluctance were far from being convinced and optimistic about their implementation. In addition to this, different criteria were recommended (creativity, sustainability, innovativeness).

Figure 5: Intended uses of the managers about the LEADER evaluation criteria



Source: own elaboration

Along the lines of their intended uses, 5 managers have shown to find useful the setting up of the evaluation around the EU standard criteria, as it is required by the EU legislation (European

Commission, 2015). These managers presented well defined lists of indicators, data-bases, or IT systems to collect data and measure the LDS and LAG performance in terms of effectiveness, efficiency, and impacts on the territory. Accurate, fixed, and quantifiable indicators were set up for measuring the performance of the achievements against these standard criteria. LAG7: *"What gets measure, gets done"* was the comment of a manager about the utility of their newly established IT system for administering all the strategy, including its evaluation. Moreover, not only did these managers show to be ready for testing their performance against this grid of criteria, but also indicated that the EU minimum criteria could be integrated into other management domains besides the evaluation (e.g. influencing the goals of the intervention logic or the organizational meaning of the LAG). Efficiency and effectiveness of the programme were not just mentioned with regard to the evaluation, but these criteria seemed to become mainstreamed, or integrated into the LAG mind-set. LAG8: "*Evaluation is to show that LAGs are effective and efficient"*. Or, as LAG12 showed in its new electronic information system provided by its National Government, the result indicator expressed as "number of jobs created by LEADER", which is well known in the LEADER community because it is expressly required by the governmental authorities to finally measure the effectiveness and efficiency of the whole programme at the EU level (European Commission, 2014), was used to draw a clear distinction in the intervention logic of that LAG: the intervention logic focused to creating job, and the intervention logic is not focused for creating jobs.

In the case of a reflexive reluctance, the situation is quite different from a happy marriage between the LAG managers and the EU's standard evaluation criteria. Managers of 8 LAGs indicated that these criteria are useless because they poorly capture the full picture of their performance, and especially because this picture arrives too late, at the end of the programme. Alternatively, some managers propose criteria which are more complex and ambiguous. Examples include the sustainability of the granted projects and jobs created, the creativity of the LAG and LDS, the overall quality of the LEADER implementation process (social inclusiveness, innovativeness, transparency), and the institutional and governance capacity to change the territory. Moreover, LAG managers lamented that the efficiency and effectiveness criteria proposed by the EU regulation, can narrow down, mislead, and penalize the overall implementation of the LEADER approach. The problem seems to be in the interpretations of these managers; they appear to be reluctant to these criteria because of the inherent trade-off with the innovative, area-based, and participatory features of the LEADER initiative. As indicated in the next quote:

> LAG6: *"LEADER was a programme promoting innovation, animation, and new ideas in rural areas, but since 2006, when the Court of Auditor said that LEADER is ineffective, our LAG has stopped to invest in such risky initiatives. Managing Authorities started to penalise us because our initiatives had a higher possibility of failure, ineffectiveness, and inefficiency".*

In other words, they view them as dysfunctional for their organizational commitment and visions. Managers view a discrepancy between their work and the way it is ultimately assessed. A discrepancy which was described as standing on two legs. On one leg, because these criteria contribute little on their evaluation purposes of learning or developing (especially for the learning and developmental LAGs).

LAG1: *"Managing Authorities design terms of reference to assess the LEADER effectiveness, efficiency, and impact, ending up with methods and conclusions that are completely useless and meaningless for us".*

On the other, because these criteria can be improperly used by decision-makers at the upper gears (e.g. sanctions, cutting-off the budget), hindering the added value expected from the LEADER approach. Another example of a trade-off was pointed out by LAG1&11, two managers dealing with complex and community-oriented initiatives, such as raising participatory decision making or re-building a sense of community in places still affected by socio-economic crises (soviet deportation, industrial collapse, high unemployment). In areas where there is a distrust towards public institutions, or a lack of proactive people, and/or gender unbalance which limits collective change, the standard criteria of efficiency or effectiveness are seen as inappropriate in rewarding the LAGs for addressing such complex challenges. Paradoxically, these criteria can even penalize them. As a result, scepticism and a lack of enthusiasm for undertaking evaluations based on these standard criteria have become accompanied by fatigue and hostility.

LAG5: *"We are tired of this evaluation requirements [referring to measuring effectiveness and efficiency]. It seems that we are getting back to the Soviet time, when we implemented programmes and we needed to show that everything was effective, efficient, and good".*

To summarize these findings, the interviews have illuminated two divergent interpretations with regard to the criteria to be used for the evaluation of LEADER at the LAG level. In the case of wide adoption, managers seemed to incorporate the EU criteria into their evaluation and beyond (way of working, planning the intervention logic, etc.). In the case of reflexive reluctance, the use and misuse of the EU standard criteria are far from being widely adopted. Rather, they are challenged in their insensitiveness to the added value of the LEADER approach (community development, innovation, networking, etc.).

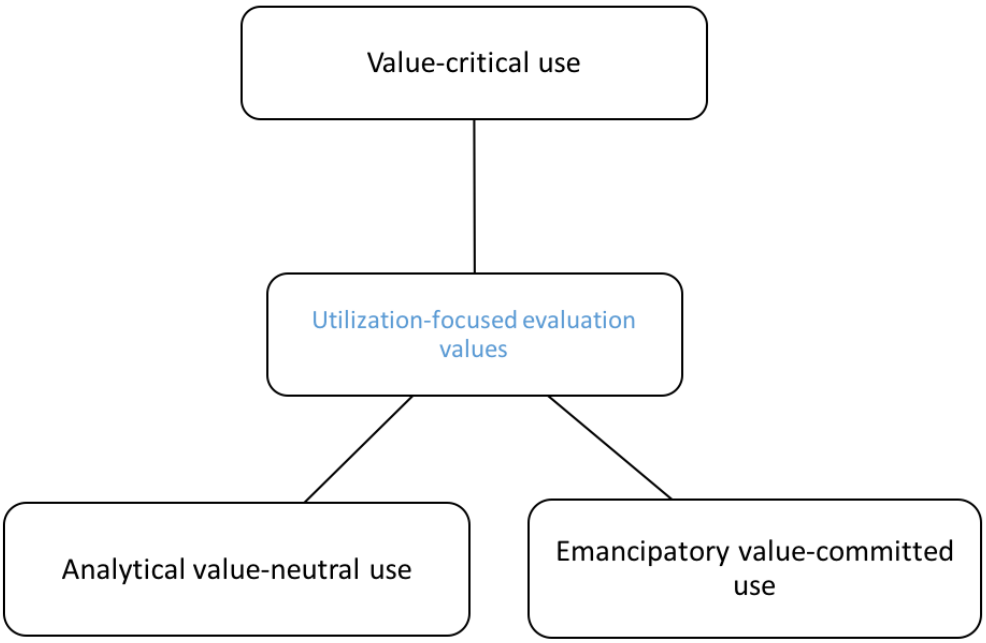
7.3.2 Evaluation values in LEADER

This section deals with the values intended to be used by managers along the LEADER evaluation. Before introducing them, a brief definition of the values is provided in order to build a common understanding. Values are fairly abstract commitments and visions, the ingredients composing social units (organizations, communities, actors), as well as the evaluation (Dahler-Larsen, 2011; Schwandt & Dahler-Larsen, 2006). Their function is normative and instrumental: values frame what is good or bad within the overall evaluation process (Dahler-Larsen, 2011). Values can be extrinsic (e.g. coming from outside the LEADER programme) or intrinsic (e.g. coming from inside the LEADER programme) to a certain social unit (Patton 2008, p. 113). To understand how the evaluation is utilized by the intended users means to investigate on the relationships, tensions, and synergies between the evaluation and the social units. In this case, the different reactions of managers to the possible values to be employed in evaluation are shown. Before elucidating them, it should be remarked that along the several reactions, values were not conceived as items of a static and self-standing catalogue. Their character and relevance changed in connection to other elements. The self-conception of the LAG (as business unit or community development agency), the ultimate scope of the evaluation (summative or formative), or the situational factors surrounding the LAGs (social distrust in public institutions,

identity crises in community, etc.). In the following section, these linkages are highlighted for their importance in understanding the mutual and dynamic relationships between the values of the evaluation and its connected system.

With these concepts in mind, three different patterns emerged from the responses with regard to which values they intend to use alongside the LEADER evaluation at the LAG level (Figure 6): critical values, analytical neutral values, and emancipatory values.

Figure 6: Intended uses of the managers about the LEADER evaluation values



Source: own elaboration from Dahler-Larsen (2011)

According to the managers of 5 LAGs, to increase its influence, evaluation should be based on the intrinsic values of the specific target groups covered by the LAGs and their LDSs. The target group can range from two extremes: the whole community or the service users of the LAG (i.e. project applicants). For the case of the whole community, managers found it more relevant to embrace the values from the inhabitants that could be reached by the LDS. As revealed in the next quote:

> LAG11: *"I don't want to be evaluated for the achievements in terms of economic or financial results, or for the number of job created…I want that the evaluation should value the governance and collective capacity I created in the territory. We should see how much human capital and awareness has grown in the territory. We should ask these kind of questions to the people in the territory instead of looking at the financial indicators".*

More precisely, in this cluster of managers, two of them specified they found it more relevant to evaluate LEADER involving who usually is left out from the LEADER initiatives and projects, e.g. children, young people, elderly people, men/woman (i.e. no direct beneficiaries). Non-beneficiaries were described as essential carriers of values, and their involvement in drawing the conclusions from

evaluation was even more privileged than other objectives and standard values. For the case of service users, managers argued that the evaluation should be carried out on the values of those stakeholders who have had formal relations and experience with the LAG and its services. Here, the managers mentioned to conceive their LAGs as service providers for the community, therefore, the values upon which evaluation should be carried should stem only from those actors who have the information, the expertise, and the experience about LEADER.

> LAG5: *"The quality of the LAGs work is not related to the number of people involved in the strategy…when we want to evaluate, our concern is to involve only those actors which have benefitted from our services".*

Quite differently, a cluster of 5 managers has expressed that the values upon which evaluation should be based are more useful when they are analytically neutral and impartial. High technical quality, independence, objectivity, and neutrality towards values were requested in order to make the evaluation a useful exercise. As LAG8 specified: "*Evaluation should be 100% accurate and objective if decisions to change the programme must be taken"*. LAG10: "*We want that some external actor, independent, and with good evaluation skills can benchmark the LAGs in our region, and measure their performance*". According to these responses, the evaluation is more convincing and useful when standard and unambiguous values are leading its process and results. Following this line, different examples were mentioned. In some cases, clear, quantifiable, and unambiguous results indicators were traced to value the extent to which the LAG and its strategy are successfully, efficiently, and coherently working. In others, value independence and analytical objectivity is sought through agreements or collaborations with external actors, such as universities or research institutes, consultants and evaluators, which can bring expert and qualified analyses about the performance of the strategy. Internal users (beneficiaries) or the LAG's partners (board, staff, members) were discarded and replaced by values that are bias-free, valid, and scientifically significant.

Finally, managers of the 3 LAGs have shown a sort of "anti-value" perspective (open sources). These managers claimed to be open towards any values, since none of them are seen as leading to the "best" evaluation. Here, evaluation is seen as a useful exercise when based on dialogue, exchange, social learning, and mutual understanding. Thus, openness to any kind of value sources was considered to bring high utility to the evaluation. For examples, the values learned by managers from their neighbouring LAGs, national and regional authorities, scientists, and experts were marked as, as essential as those from the ordinary people, non-beneficiaries, beneficiaries, and internal staff. However, against this positive view, managers claimed that involving multiple stakeholders and perspectives is largely desirable, yet not a unanimous and easy task to achieve. For example, internal conflicts into the LAG board need to be overcome on the degree of involvement and openness to different or contrasting views, and new resources and specific tools need to be proposed for making this openness as useful and concrete as possible.

7.4. Which topics do LAG managers intend to focus in the LEADER evaluation?

To conclude this chapter about the thesis results, this section exposes the subjects or topics on which the managers have expressed their main intended focus for the LEADER evaluation at LAG level. Different topics have been exhibited: 1.) the process of implementation of the local development strategy, 2.) the results achieved through the LDS, 3.) the LAG as an organizational

unit, 4.) the projects supported by the LAG, and finally 5.) the larger system in which the LAG works. Their description is addressed below.

Quite often during the interviews, managers mentioned more than one of these subjects indicated above, which does not help the researcher to cluster the managers into sort of thematic groups made in relation to one specific topic or another, as it was done for the previous elements. Usually, the topics above identified were combined, and the combination seemed to be based on a logical coherence. For example, the managers interested in focusing the evaluation on the process of the LDS (topic 1.) were complementarily expressing to focus also on the LAG as an organizational unit (topic 2.), because the LAG is the management body implementing the LDS process. Therefore, the designations of these subjects should not be uniquely attached to a single manager or cluster, but viewed as intentions overlapping among different managers. In the following parts, these subjects are explained in detail.

1.) As stated in a group of six managers, the process of implementation of the LDS is deemed as the valuable and useful subject to which evaluation must dedicate the primary focus. These managers claimed that evaluation should look at how the activities and processes for the territory have been put in place, and evaluate them for the quality (e.g. inclusiveness, creativity, innovativeness, complexity), the fidelity with the LEADER approach, and the efforts and resources that have been mobilized along it. Examples of topics reflecting this evaluation focus are:

- ✓ the advisory services provided;
- ✓ the animation and networking activities;
- ✓ the capacity building actions, as well as training and education projects;
- ✓ the conditions arranged to support or protect niche innovation;
- ✓ the participatory approaches undertaken;
- ✓ the social inclusion and equity respected along the implementation of the strategy;
- ✓ the innovativeness of the strategy, etc.

Of course, these examples of actions could be read in the form of numeric outputs produced during the implementation of the LDS. Indeed, two managers were following this view, and simply asking to focus on the process as strategy outputs. However, the main point claimed by the other four managers was not about accounting for them or monitoring their accomplishments. For these managers, the focus should go beyond how many activities have been carried out along the process, but instead focus on how the process has unfolded (its quality). Often, these managers were referring to these subjects with the (well-acclaimed) *added value of the LEADER approach*. The utility for focusing on the *added value* was linked to the LEADER approach, or the promotion thereof. These managers have shown to follow the LEADER programme for its innovative and distinctive approach among the other EU Rural Development initiatives. Focusing on its added value would mean looking at its core feature. According to these managers, the examples of subjects listed above should be the questions of joint reflection and evaluation. Put differently, the focus should be on the adoption and application of such alternative ways of working (e.g. public-private partnership, area-based development, etc.) that, in turn, distinguishes LAGs from other traditional and conventional organizations involved in rural development.

2.) Another topic is focused on the results achieved by the LDS. As stated in several interviews, (especially in the accountability LAG), evaluation is about measuring and assessing the extent to which the results achieved with the LDS have contributed to local development. In line with this view, several managers expressed their intentions to primarily focus on the achievements, impacts, and changes accrued throughout the local development strategy. These managers shared several examples of results (outcomes and outputs) they want to evaluate, some of them raising several challenges. The main example raised was the problem of measuring outcomes of the LDS such as, cultural heritage, collective trust, territorial governance, creativity stimulated in the territory, quality of rural life, social connectivity of rural actors, innovation capacity, or community sense of civic sense. Other indications of results (output) seemed to be easier to conceptualize, understand, define, measure, analyse, and report, such as grants delivered, new job created, social services provided for the territory. For this group of managers, the focus of the evaluation should be the final effects generated by the LAG and its designed LDS. Some of the reasons given for focusing on these subjects can be found in the purposes of the accountability LAG (increase transparency, accountability, inform decisions to steer the programmes, etc.).

3.) A third subject of evaluation mentioned by the managers was the LAG itself; the LAG as an organizational unit. As reported by a group of four managers, evaluations should devote itself to the LAG as a fundamental entity within the LEADER programme, by focusing on the human and social capital that it represents for the community, as well as on the quality management and the efforts activated by the LAG. The managers of this group were united by the same opinion that evaluation should be focused on the organizational aspects of the LAG, on the unique characteristics of its public-private nature and coordination, and that the staff working in the LAGs are dealing with quite broad and mixed issues (social, environmental, economic, institutional, etc.). Different examples were mentioned, such as focusing on the:

- ✓ quality of the entire staff (creativity, innovativeness, pro-activeness);
- ✓ the organizational efficiency and transparency of the decision-making process;
- ✓ the group spirit and diversity of the partnership;
- ✓ the communication skills of the LAG with international players;
- ✓ the cost-benefit effectiveness of the LAG management;
- ✓ the adoption of a code of ethics and conduct (e.g. regarding gender equality, independency of the LAG selection committee from conflict of interests with the applicants);
- ✓ the respect of a fair turnover rate of the members in the LAG board;
- ✓ the flexibility to grasp, respond, and take advantageous of new territorial opportunities;
- ✓ and the ability to involve new and local sectors and stakeholders within the community development.

In this group of managers, the list of topics to be scrutinized during the evaluation is long, but the common object is the LAG and its several organizational features, dimensions (e.g. social, economic, institutional), and virtues. The utility expressed in this focus was linked to the issues of quality control and enhancement of the LEADER programme. In brief, these managers revealed that the quality of the LEADER programme cannot be controlled by evaluating the strategy because it is considered to be affected by too many variables (e.g. LAG5: "*You make a plan and it goes somewhere else"*).

Rather, these managers intended to focus the evaluation on the LAG because this represents the most important unit of LEADER whose quality can be controlled and enhanced.

4.) Strictly related to the previous topic, another group of 6 managers intended to focus specifically on (and for some also limited to) the quality of the projects applied by the local stakeholders in terms of project assessment, such as: feasibility, coherence with the territorial needs, sustainability, or social impact. Moreover, in contrast to the group of managers interested in evaluating the results of the LDS, this group of managers argued that the ultimate results of the single projects cannot be under the control of the LAG, neither aggregated into a single framework to be submitted for a summative evaluation. As stated in some interviews, managers think that the LAGs cannot, or are not responsible for controlling the follow-up of every project, as for example in terms of final achievements. Thus, the primary focus of evaluation should be on assessing, ex ante, the conditions, characteristics, and qualities of the project proposals and its applicants, while the evaluation of the project's results is a secondary focus for the LAG. Keeping this focus, evaluation should look in depth at the single project proposal, and it should trigger the strategic thinking of the applicants throughout the project design and application. When focused on single projects, the evaluation is considered to be helpful for managers to guide the local stakeholders in self-assessing the quality, sustainability and opportunities of their projects, in reference to both their own business and the whole territory. Focusing on the projects supported was explained as disentangling and assessing the multiple features (e.g. feasibility, profitability, innovativeness, social impact, relevance), to then suggest actions for improvements. If the focus is on the project, managers envisage the evaluation as a tool to say: (LAG4) "a smiling no" when the project is not convincing or inconsistent with the local strategy, and to give support to the applicants for planning and thinking about a better quality of their proposal (suggesting alternative options or confronting them with existing or similar experiences).

5.) Lastly, the larger system in which the LAG works is considered. According to the answer of one manager interviewed (LAG6), evaluation should be the opportunity to look at how the surrounding world looks like. Evaluation is useful when it concentrates its attention on new topics, sectors, actors, as well as on conditions and circumstances which are not necessarily under the control of the LAG. Rather than being an exclusive topic, the majority of managers have revealed that such a focus is quite extensive as these quotes indicate:

- ✓ *How do other EU regions support LAGs? Do you know if other LAGs have organized a lobby network in your region? Are there EU networks of LAGs to which we can affiliate to?*"
- ✓ *Which kind of trends are the rural areas...facing? Is it only in our LAG that young people are not willing to take part in local development? Are other rural areas having the same gender problems as we have in our LAG* [referring to the lack of men involved in community projects]*?*
- ✓ *What is happening in your country? Are LAGs willing to cooperate with us in cross-evaluations?*
- ✓ *How likely is it that LEADER would have a budget cut-off next year? Because our LAG is thinking how to survive also without the LEADER money.*
- ✓ *Are other LAGs dealing with emigration issues, and how?*

In this cluster of managers, the focus of the evaluation seemed to go beyond the subjects placed between the LAG and the implementation of the local strategy. It appears that the managers wanted to exceed the boundaries of the LDS evaluation – i.e. assessing the units within it, e.g. the LAG and

the strategy - and exploring what are the changes and dynamics within the larger system, in terms of rules, organizations, and socio-demographic phenomena that occur around and via the LEADER programme. This was intended to be useful for exploring the possibilities and uncertainties in the larger system, and eventually to inform the LAG in order to take some actions to connect or deal with them.

To summarize, this chapter has displayed five different topics for focusing the LEADER evaluation. The results revealed in the interviews, indicate that different focuses corresponds to different perspectives about the LEADER programme itself, ranging from those who view LEADER as a development strategy, and as such, the focus of evaluation should be on the results achieved, and those who understand LEADER as a particular approach for rural development, whose added value is encapsulated in its approach and process, with that merit to be observed above all (bottom-up, participatory, area-based, innovative, etc.). Other managers have expressed their intentions to focus the LEADER evaluation on the organizational quality of the LAG, looking at the management and governance capacities in the territory, or more specifically on the quality of the projects that it advises, supports, and financial grants. To conclude, other managers have expressed their interests (tacitly) and intentions (explicitly) to focus the evaluation on the larger system in which the LAG operates. The overlap and combinations expressed during these interviews indicates that none of these subjects is exclusive or dominant. While the last focuses on the larger system in which the LAG operates and appears more cross-cutting and secondary, topic 1 (LDS process of implementation), 3 (the LAG as an organizational unit), and 4 (the projects supported by the LAG) were often mentioned together; In contrast, topic 2 (the results achieved by the LDS) was usually expressed singularly or in combination with only one of the other topics. One factor that seemed to glue these combinations together was the time span necessary for applying these focuses.

8. Discussion of results

By researching for the theoretical aspects related to the LEADER programme, and scrutinizing the issue of utility of its evaluation at LAG level, the results of this thesis present several insights and observations from the theory and practice in regards to the design of utilization-focused approaches for the LEADER evaluation. Therefore, in this section, the scope is to discuss them together, connecting the insights gained from both theory and practice, and finally share some lesson learned from this journey, which can eventually be helpful for the evaluation decision makers of the LEADER programme. The discussion is structured in three parts. The first part frames and reflects upon the theoretical elements of the LEADER programme identified in Chapter 6. The second part summarizes and reflects on the practical elements to take into account into the design of the approach, as indicated in Chapter 7. Finally, the third part proposes some suggestions to the scientists and evaluation-decision makers for focusing the LEADER evaluation approach to its final utilizations.

8.1 Theoretical elements underlying the LEADER evaluation

The conceptual analysis of the features underlying the LEADER programme has remarked essentially that LEADER is far away from a linear intervention, that its complexity starts from the inherent characteristics and governance (Marquardt et al., 2012), and continues with the external and global forces interacting with the "local" development. The complexity of the LEADER programme emerges from:

(1) the *heterogeneous* and *multi-dimensional* elements that are inherently promoted by, and embodied within its approach and instruments;
(2) the nested *institutional framings and actors* that mutually interrelated into the multi-level governance (or multi funded in the case of CLLD);
(3) the *unpredictability, ambiguity, and multiplicity of scale of the outcomes* which are produced by, and spreading over multiple sites and governance levels;
(4) the *changing and emerging contextual conditions* within and with which the LEADER programme develops.

This suggests to carefully considered these four theoretical elements by the evaluation decision makers, as well as by any other evaluation practitioners or alike, when designing the approach to evaluate LEADER. Going through these four elements, the complex nature recognized in the LEADER is further disentangled, and some implications on the design of its evaluation approach are drawn.

(1) Starting from the first point, the ***multidimensionality*** of LEADER refers to the interplay between the social, economic, sectorial, political, environmental, cultural, and institutional dimensions (Charlier, 2001; Storey, 1999), while, ***heterogeneity*** refers to the wide assortment and variability of instruments that the LEADER programme employs (networking, cooperation, capacity building training, education, financial instruments, and technical assistance). Through this bundle of multiple dimensions and instruments, the LEADER actors at any level of governance, co-produce social relations and goods throughout the community development (Barke & Newton, 1997; European Commission, 2011; Storey, 1999). In terms of evaluation, this imply that focusing separately on one single dimensions of this interconnected arrangement, or the

very opposite, assessing LEADER as a black box or whole package, is like omitting the core aspects of LEADER, such as the multiplicity of the several relationships (conflicts, synergies, incompatibilities) and interactions among its heterogeneous parts (Stame, 2004). This theoretical element raises two recommendations in regard to the evaluation.

Recommendation 1

The Formative approach of the LEADER evaluation should embrace systemic thinking at all levels of governance in order to explain how community development interacts with several tools and dimensions animated in the LEADER programmes. System thinking in the LEADER evaluation would allow the intended users to analyse and understand the synergise, the antagonisms, or the incompatibilities in relationships, between tools (e.g. small fund schemes to support new cooperation) and system dimensions (e.g. social and economic, political and environmental) which influence the positive changes triggered by the LEADER programme. Decisions about the evaluation methods should be aware that within the LEADER approach, tools and dimensions are not self-standing alone, but feedback loops and relations exist between them (Grieve & Weinspach, 2011). Therefore, when evaluation methods are selected to describe or understand the changes triggered by the LEADER programme, and chosen to eventually solve bottlenecks or negative interdependences, this thesis suggests to orient the choices toward methods that envisage system thinking (Mierlo et al., 2010; Williams & Hummelbrunner, 2010) , such as casual loop diagrams (to identify non linear relationships), system dynamics (to capture the effects of nonlinear relationships), and systems analysis (too observe oppositions or synergies among actors and system dimensions). Through these methods, the intended users at any level of the LEADER evaluation can critically make sense of, and manage the interfaces and mutual interrelationships among dimensions, actors, and the tools embedded into the LEADER approach.
the LEADER approach.

Recommendation 2

When judging the merits of the LEADER programme, the *summative approach of evaluation could be more constructive and faithful to the LEADER approach if opened to pluralism and dualism.* This suggests that one should judge the worthiness of the LEADER programme by involving multiple perspectives and looking at the programme as the interplay between the intervention and the wider system, at both the local and extra-local levels. LEADER is about people, and its instruments are predominantly aimed at fostering human interactions (Farrell, et al., 2005; Marquardt, et al. 2012; Shortall, 2008), as well as supporting system changes in rural areas. Using evaluation models that treat the LEADER as a black box, preventing the evaluation to be open to multiple perspectives enclosed in the LEADER system and sub-systems (e.g. from local beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, stakeholders from other geographical areas), or without acknowledging the dualistic relationship of the local development agencies (e.g. the Local Action Group, the member of the LAG, the entrepreneur, etc.) with their social, spatial, and historical systems (Bachmann, 2016), will lead to grave consequences in measuring effects, making it difficult to distinguish causality and determine what has really shaped, or have mostly been shaped by, the pre-existing features and conditions. Therefore, this thesis suggests that, in order to develop more constructive judgements about the merits of the LEADER programme, summative-kind of evaluations should be deeply rooted and sensitive to the historical and contextual conditions of each area, and avoid to relying simply on the exclusive use of objective and standard indicators. Following, the use of the common outcome indicator to compare and aggregate the value of LEADER at the EU level it should be limited to other functions

(e.g. accountability, communication to the public audience), rather than drawing universal judgments or lessons that are disjoined by the underlying and varying factors and conditions in the EU areas. Methods for assessing the impacts of LEADER should consider the bonds with the socio-ecological and cultural structure (existing rules, constrains, conditions) and employing a longitudinal and dynamic perspective. Examples from innovation history analysis (Klerkx, et al., 2010; Spielman, et al., 2009) or process monitoring of impacts (Mierlo et al., 2010; Williams & Hummelbrunner, 2010) can be used by authorities and LAGs to assess the merits of LEADER, to assess the pre-existing and dynamic context, i.e. considering the effects of LEADER in relation to the rural transition towards business networks and trans-local linkages (Dubois & Skuras, 2014), the agricultural restructuring process (Copus & De Lima, 2014; Hubbard & Gorton, 2011), and the micro- and macro-economic, demographic, migratory, and labour trends in rural Europe (Copus & De Lima, 2014; Farole, Rodriguez-Pose, & Storper, 2011; Johansson, 2014; Kasimis, 2010).

(2) The second conceptual element is similarly related to the multidimensionality discussed above, but specifically connected to the ***institutional and regulatory framework*** of the multilevel (and multi-funded for CLLD) governance of LEADER. Alcantara, et al. (2016, p. 39) defines Multi-Level governance as the "*policy-making in which government(s) engage with a variety of non-governmental actors, organized at different territorial scales, in a process of decisions-making that aims to collaboratively produce some sort of public goods"*. In this framework, "*complex multi-tier administrative scheme*", are embodied by LEADER (Nemes, et al. 2014), and by definition, are bounded in the multi-level encounters and negotiations among the institutional framings brought into play by governmental (representative authorities) and non-governmental actors (market and civil society). Tensions, hierarchies, synergies, incorporations, and integration emerging within and between these institutional framings play a central role in the design, functioning, and effects of the LEADER programme (Liesbet & Gary, 2003; Stame, 2004), and add new complexities to its evaluation. For instance, cause and effect linkages can be affected by internal and external aspects of the EU LEADER institutional framework. The first is about the institutional structure (Does LEADER function better in or out of the Multi-Level Governance?) or the institutional mechanisms (reporting, sanctions, rules, deadlines) of the LEADER governance. The second is about the institutional factors (practices, worldviews, beliefs, values) at the level of the local and extra-local systems. Given the multiple actors and institutional framing of the interplay across different levels and layers of LEADER, uncertainty, tensions, and ambivalences might arise when assessing the results or the functioning of the programme.

Recommendation 3

In order to account for the influence of this institutional framework*, the design, transfer, and use of the LEADER evaluation should enhance the interactions between the actors embedded into LEADER's multi-level governance.* Starting with mapping the LEADER stakeholders across the vertical and horizontal line (see Figure 4 and 5), the LEADER evaluation should trigger the communication among actors from different institutional levels (Stame 2004, p. 68), uncover the assumptions governing decisions and thinking, tackle the institutional tensions among the governance levels, e.g. in terms of evaluation requirements and purposes of one level dominating over or mismatching with the other (High & Nemes, 2007; Nemes et al., 2014), and creating a forum for integrating and negotiating the multiplicity of perspectives, worldviews, and stakes of the LEADER evaluation (Kusters, 2011; Schwandt & Dahler-Larsen, 2006; Stame, 2004). Workshops, steering

groups, and facilitated interactive processes involving actors from different levels and layers can be used to create space for negotiating the rules about the LEADER evaluation, to transform those that might hinder the expected changes, to engage actors into a critical analysis of tensions and synergies, to build a common understanding about the features of several institutional framings, and find alignment between multiple intentions about the evaluation's purpose, values, criteria, methods, and process uses. Alignment should be found vertically (i.e. from Brussels to the LAGs, and vice versa) and horizontally (e.g. within the LAG's community, between LAGs of the same region or different regions). This requires the enlargement of investments to coordinate and facilitate interactions among different institutional framings, rather than opting for the control or guidance from a single authority on their stakeholders. Moreover, the costs and the benefits from tackling this complexity (e.g. building a common ground for interconnected institutional framings, creating an evaluation community based on dialogue and democratic negotiation of stakes and intentions) must be assessed, appreciated, and valued from different perspectives (political, social, governmental sustainability), not only in monetary terms (Heider, 2016).

Recommendation 4

In line with the recommendation above, the *LEADER evaluation approach should also reflect upon itself, about the effects of its essential elements and structure, in order to account for how decisions about evaluation simultaneously shape, and are being shaped by the internal and external institutional system.* Based on the interviews with managers, certain evaluation requirements from authorities (e.g. indicating the effects of LEADER in terms of number of jobs created) have been reflected in the process of planning and execution at the LAG level, e.g. through the setting up of goals linked to the evaluation requirements, the design of the local intervention logic according to what is required and what is not required to report to the authorities, the exclusion of innovative projects because they do not respect the coherence between goals and activities, or because they are weak in terms of efficiency when assessed by the authorities. Several elements of the LEADER evaluation (requirements, purposes, values) can be influenced by the institutional actors and layers of the internal and external LEADER systems. Such simultaneous or mutual influence can be expressed in terms of *constitutive effects* (Dahler-Larsen, 2011, 2014). Constitutive effects, refers to the reactions to actions of the evaluation. They express the consequences generated along the design and implementation of the evaluation, especially when it foresees the interaction between actors with different institutional positions, interpretative frames and worldviews (Dahler-Larsen, 2011). Therefore, this thesis recommends to look at evaluation as unit of analysis, to understand how the encounters between the evaluation stakeholders, the reporting requirements, the legislative acts, general expectations, rules, and discourses can have effects beyond the declared purposes of the LEADER evaluation

(3) The third element that brings into light the complexity of LEADER concerns the nature of its expected outcomes. Chapter 6 remarked that LEADER envisages changes at the multi-scale level (individual, relational, cultural, and structural), and multi-site level (local and extra-local). Outcomes are multidimensional, values-laden, ambiguous, and heterogeneous (e.g. cultural change, innovation, social inclusion). The classic example of ambiguity concerns the cultural impact of LEADER, that is whether its assessment should be done for the purpose of the protection of the local traditions from external and global influences, or to pave the way for global forces to encounter local cultures (Ray, 1999a). Many outcomes envisaged by LEADER, such as empowering community, building, trust and leadership, or fostering innovation, are difficult to

define and calculate in terms of numbers (Black & Earnest, 2009; Farrell, 2000; Patton, 2016). Moreover, the value, the meaning, or the weight of some tangible and intangible outcomes might vary according to the place (Dargan & Shucksmith, 2008; Patton, 2016). On the other hand, upper tiers call for evidence-based, objective, and standard indicators and values that can be easily aggregated to measure the success or failures of the programme (European COM - DG AGRI, 2015). Therefore, this third theoretical elements suggests:

Recommendation 5

Outcomes might have different interpretations, dimensions, meanings, and intended uses according to the stakeholders of the LEADER programme (European Commission, LAGs, direct and indirect beneficiaries, political parties, etc.). Therefore, the toolbox of institutional, methodological, and technical solutions for capturing the impact of the programme could be enlarged to methods than reconcile the context-specificity and intangibility of the outcomes with the needs of authorities to respect accountability and transparency of the programme. Methods such as audio-visual learning history (Mierlo et al., 2010), boundary actors crossing institutional level for accountability purposes (Regeer et al., 2016), workshop tours, photovoice, and online platforms for learning and exchanges among peers to assess the outcomes should be enthusiastically proposed as an alternative evaluation practice for the LEADER community (Nuutinen, et al., 2016)

(4) The last element emerged from the conceptual analysis of LEADER has been partially addressed above, but in different terms, and refers to the ***historical, physical, and dynamic arena in which the LEADER programme is implemented.*** The fact that the LEADER programme does not take place within a social and economic vacuum is largely known (Gilda Farrell, 2000; Katona & Fieldsend, 2006; Scott, 2004). In fact, human, economic, institutional, social factors and physical assets existing at level of implementation change continuously together with the larger context (new technological regimes, changes in rural behaviour, etc.). In order to promote sustainable and systemic development, the LEADER programme demands to deal with all these dimensions simultaneously and interactively. Rational and classic evaluation approaches (e.g. upwards accountability, impact assessment, linear models) can present potential limits to deal with the complex and broad environment in which the LEADER programme unfolds. More goal-free, longitudinal focused, and developmental approach to evaluation, which looks at the interrelations between the programme and its external environment over time (Patton, 1994, 2008, 2011) could be proposed to adapt the LEADER evaluation to highly dynamic and historically sensitive place-based developments.

8.2. Practical elements underlying the LEADER evaluation

In the search of surprises, the meeting with the managers have brought into light an interesting scenario, a large and variegated landscape full of interpretations, situations, intentions, and practices related to the LEADER evaluation, rich of contrasts and synergies, both within and among each specific managers. In these encounters with the managers, the results have indicated that the intentions to be considered when designing the LEADER evaluation approach can follow several directions, with the result of fragmenting and shaping the utilization-focused LEADER approach in multiple forms, as indicated in Table 5.

Table 4: The multiple intentions of the managers about the LEADER evaluation approach

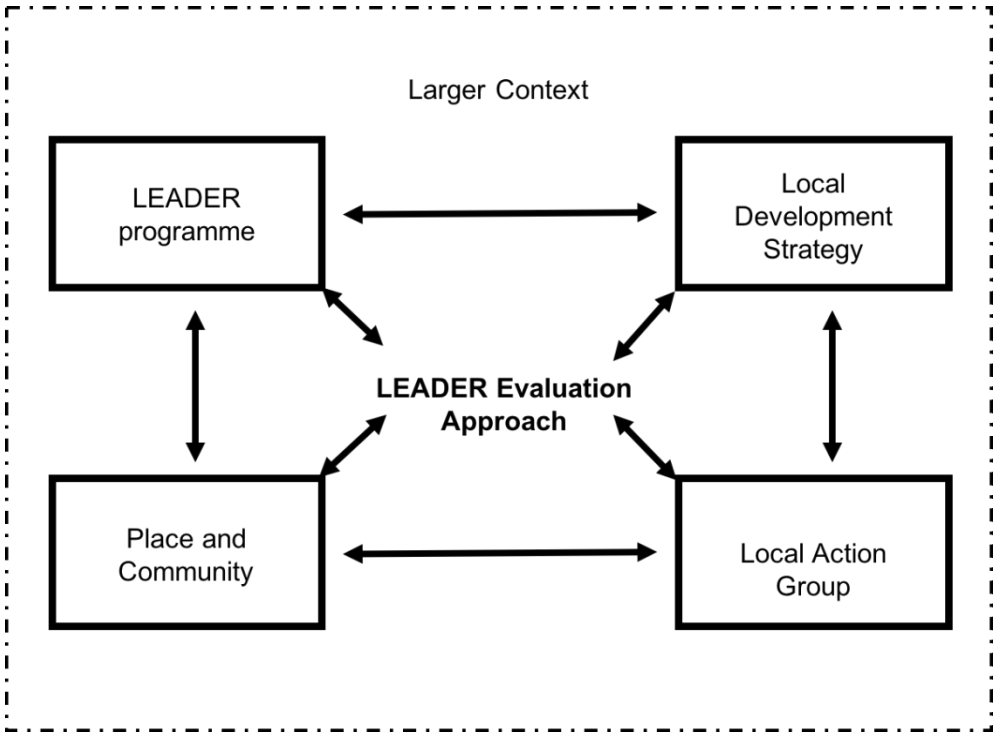
Elements of the LEADER approach	***Managers' intentions***
The LEADER evaluation purposes	✓ Accountability; ✓ Learning; ✓ Developmental.
The LEADER evaluation process and methods	✓ Support the performance and the development of the local development strategy; ✓ Increase community engagement in the local development strategy and LAG's work; ✓ Engage the LAG into the evaluation thinking; ✓ Increase the reactivity and problem solving of the LAG.
The LEADER evaluation criteria and values	✓ EU standard evaluation criteria; ✓ LAG specific criteria; ✓ Analytically neutral values; ✓ Emancipatory values; ✓ Critical values.
The LEADER evaluation topics or evaluand	✓ The process of implementation of the local development strategy; ✓ The results achieved through the LDS; ✓ The LAG as organizational unit; ✓ The projects supported by the LAG; ✓ The larger context in which the LAG works

By considering such heterogeneity of perspectives, it is difficult to conclude that by involving more LAG managers, or extending the sample to other intended users (e.g. citizen, LAG board, LAG member, etc.), the intentions related to these four elements could either diverge and increase in number, or squeeze, overlap and align with each other. Indeed, many managers have shown common patterns in their intentions but, in any case, the diversity of the results have basically undermined the idea that proposing one approach fitting all the LAGs in EU could largely respond to the intentions of the local evaluator practitioners. Thus, a top-down design, one that it is not emerged together with

the final intended users of the evaluation, would anyway risk to produce contested, inappropriate, or unsuitable evaluation approach, given the polymorphous picture described in Table 5. In this multifaceted set of intentions, the findings have opened the challenge to design a EU evaluation approach that is on one hand responsive to the diversity among LAGs, on the other presenting some common, comparable, and combining evaluation elements among all the evaluation at LAGs level.

High & Nemes (2007) have already talked about designing an hybrid approach, which integrates the local (bottom-up) with and the extra-local (top-down) needs about the LEADER evaluation. However, the heterogeneity of the intentions emerged at bottom level, and their interlinkages with other external forces suggest that this ideal hybridization is, by definition, a complex task. Indeed, the complexity of this exercise not only refers to aligning and integrate the diverse intentions varying among EU LAGs. To understand the complexity behind the LEADER evaluation approach, it is necessary to take into account that such diversity is interrelated with many other pragmatic factors surfaced during the interviews. By clustering these factors into five domains, the complexity of the design of the LEADER evaluation can be found in the reciprocal interrelations between: 1) the LAG as organizational unit; 2) the specific features of its Local Development Strategy; 3) the place and the community in which the LDS and the LAG operate; and 4) the whole political, governance, economic, and institutional system of the LEADER programme. Moreover, to complete this complex and interrelated picture (Figure 7), the practical challenges to design the LEADER evaluation approach arises because these four domains are mutually influenced by the 5) larger context with which they continuously interact.

Figure 7: The complexity of the utilization-focused LEADER evaluation approach



Source: own elaboration

Following the utilization-focused approach, Figure 7 suggests that the design of the LEADER evaluation at LAG level is not only a methodological exercise aimed to deliberate and implement a

bundle of standard principles and methods useful in every LAG's situation. Guidelines and evaluators supporting the utilization of the LEADER evaluation can consider the opportunity to investigate in depth about the specific features of these domains, and facilitate multiple stakeholders to go through this complex arena. The features emerged in these different domains are explained here below.

The Local Action Group

LAG are not just standard "implementing bodies". LAGs presents several features, and these features change accordingly from place to place. The interviews have shown that the LAGs are more than just regular public-private agencies, or similar and comparable units to all EU areas. In fact, each manager has described her/his own LAG in different way, e.g. in terms of:

1. organizational model (modus operandi),
2. composition (e.g. gender, number of the members in the board, number of working staff, etc.);
3. level of experience in the LEADER programme;
4. future visions and strategy also outside the LEADER programme;
5. internal situations (tensions, conflict of interests among members, power dynamics);
6. degree of openness to criticisms and attitude towards the evaluation;
7. human and social capacities (e.g. connection with the Universities);
8. professional background of the staff.

Just to add other relevant example to raise the importance of understanding the characteristics of the LAG, during the interview, some managers have revealed to be used to work with members of the board who continuously turn every six months; while others have confessed that they would have done everything for refreshing the members who have been sitting in the board for many years of LEADER. Other managers have showed to have several departments and offices in their LAG (e.g. specific sections for tourism, communication, project management, etc.), while others have simply said: "*I am the LAG, that's all. The board decides, and I do*!". And so on.

All these practical factors have suggested that, firstly, the Local Action Groups are not standard units, and several organizational factors change across the EU regions. Secondly and more importantly, they have shown that by changing the features of the LAG, the intentions of the managers seem to change or to align accordingly, as if they were to made to fit with their specific organizational features of the LAG. For example, LAGs facing internal resistance (e.g. managers under contractual pressure with the board, conflict of interests within the same board), or simply adopting a more managerial way of working (e.g. planning the strategy through a clear definition of the goals) were more inclined on evaluation for accountability and performance measurement, rather than for more (they say): "*sophisticated*" alternatives (in reference to participatory or developmental evaluation). Therefore, this thesis suggests that, in order to focus the LEADER evaluation on the final utilization, evaluation-decision makers should to look at the linkages between the organizational aspects of the LAG and the intentions of the intended users, since those domains have appeared to be well connected. Therefore, more research could be conducted to identify what are the key variables characterizing the LAGs besides their essential elements (e.g. public-private partnership), disentangling the LAG as organizational unit into its several structural, governance, historical, social features, and understand how these features relate and influence the intentions of the intended users about the LEADER evaluation.

The Local Development Strategy

Following the same variability observed for the organizational features of the LAGs, the Local Development Strategy have manifested several differences, which have been linked with the intentions of the managers about the utilization-focused of the LEADER evaluation. The differences in the LDSs regard: 1.) the kind of approach used to design the LDS; 2.) the financial, human, social resources mobilized and available for the LDS; 3.) the kind of goals and activities planned for the LDS; 4.) the way of conceiving the theory of change designed for the LDS; and 5.) the stakes and the stakeholders involved in its design and implementation. This shows that, although the LDSs across EU could be seen as common and similar entities, several elements distinguish each LDS from the others. Just to give some examples, a manager described that the LDS was designed by involving more than 150 stakeholders, without a pre-selection, but inviting them exactly for their different experiences and through the use of specific participatory approach, e.g. using the Theory U (Scharmer, 2009). Others, instead, have confessed that the LDS was firstly drawn together with just few stakeholders (LAG5: "*in order to make less noise in the community*"), and after, it was presented to the wider audience for a consultation process. Accordingly, when it comes to evaluation, some managers expressed to find more useful to continue the evaluation of the LDS by relying on participatory approaches, while others considered the same methods (participatory) as less relevant or comfortable. This differences suggest that the intentions of the managers about the use of the LEADER evaluation go hand by hand with the features of the LDS, and a deep analysis about how the LDSs have been designed, what do they envisage or try to engender, or how they are conducted, could help scholars and evaluator "experts" to understand how certain evaluation proposal does or does not respond to the specific intentions of the managers.

The Place and the Community

As suggested by Nemes, et al. (2014), the implementation of LEADER, and in extension also of its evaluation, is bonded with the institutional features of the place and community in which it is designed and performed. Indeed, the environmental and economic assets, as well as the human, institutional, and social factors play an important role in the LEADER implementation and results (Copus & De Lima, 2014; Katona & Fieldsend, 2006; Scott, 2004). These regard for example: 1.) the level of (dis)trust towards public-private agencies; 2.) the culture of collective decision making; 3.) the democratic traditions; 4.) or the attitude towards volunteer work of the community. All these factors should be seen as external object or focuses of the LEADER evaluation, but also linked with its design and final use. To be more precise, the idea of place and community should not lead the reader to demarcate this social arena with that defined by the administrative boundaries officially drawn and covered by the LAG. If place and community are rather seen as boundless and open as suggested by human geographers (Cresswell, 2014), the complexity of the LEADER evaluation can come into view through the multiple and dynamic relations of global and local factors interacting with and through the community and the place. In fact, many references made by the managers to useful practices, values, assets and knowledge about the evaluation were coming from other LEADER areas, which testify that the design of the evaluation approach is not only influenced by, and embedded into the "local heuristics system", but it accommodates the linkages with factors and practices coming from other places and communities.

The LEADER programme

The LEADER programme refers to the overall system of resources, governance mechanisms, principles, standards, and discourses related to LEADER, starting from Brussels going down to the LAGs through the multi-level governance. During the interviews, managers have linked their intentions about the LEADER evaluation with several features of the LEADER programme, such as: 1.) the discourses of the national authorities in regard to the strategic importance of LEADER for rural development; 2.) the widespread perception within the LEADER community about Brussels as sort of bureaucratic machine imposing only top-down rules on the programme; 3.) the political and policy shift of the LEADER programme into the multi-level governance after the 2006; 4.) the National governments' threats for cutting off the budget dedicated to the LEADER programme; 5.) the cases and scandals of corruptions happening some projects of the LEADER programme; 6.) the reporting requirements and sanctions set up by the regional managing authorities for the LAGs; and 7.) other practical elements related to the EU LEADER programme as whole. These factors are not alien or external to the final use, but have seemed to shape the intentions of the local managers towards certain directions and purposes.

The larger context

There are numerous insights collected along the interviews which can be listed for suggesting to the evaluation decision makers that these four practical elements mentioned above are not isolated from the world, but placed within, and influenced by the larger and dynamic context. Differently by Schiller, (2010, p. 23), who refers to these contextual factors influencing the LEADER evaluation process as those coming from within the LEADER system (e.g. EU and Regional regulations about the LEADER evaluation), the answers collected by the managers show that these contextual factors concerns the outside environment of the LEADER system: e.g. the political pressures from agricultural lobbies; the expansion of companies providing new IT tools and systems for the monitoring and evaluation; the pre and post-Brexit referendum and the political crises evolving in the European Union; or the integration of LEADER with institutional framings, objectives and tools coming from other EU funds and programmes (i.e. CLLD). All these factors were not only orbiting outside the LEADER system, but interact with the intentions of the managers (e.g. shaping their perceptions and believes about LEADER as a wide, common, and European project; changing the way of collecting data and managing the strategy, etc.), demonstrating that the design of the LEADER evaluation, and its final use, is a quite complex and unpredictable issue which need to be tackled systematically, and in its making process.

9. Conclusions

What should be considered to make good use of the LEADER evaluation? Firstly, it is important to start from the essential elements building the LEADER programme. LEADER is not a simple programme. LEADER is a bridge, is a platform linking the Local and European institutions together. It is a programme that carries the spirit of rural communities in the era of modernization, by joining together the local and the extra-local arena, by binding multiple dimensions of places and communities, and by inviting the local institutions to transform themselves together with the global changes. Positioning the evaluation on the back seats of the bureaucratic and technocratic industry could lead to greater tail risk of jeopardizing democratic and changing process, rather than surprising the EU citizens with new information and development. There is a lot of scepticisms, distrust, and negativity relating to the role of the EU, exemplified by recent political episodes, and the evaluation of LEADER should not risk attracting these attitudes and views on to itself. Accountability and summative evaluations are legitimate, but do not offer the unique solutions for increasing the final utilization. Therefore, the LEADER evaluation needs to bring back the essential elements of its programme: innovative, network-oriented, cooperative, multi-sectorial and participatory approaches for place based and community development. To do so, the majority of the tools and solutions are already in place, and new tools can still be conceived, with a glance on their final utilization.

Utilization, as well as the LEADER programme itself, is not straightforward and a standard end for the evaluation exercise. Evaluation proposals based mainly on academic or policy arguments fall out in the good will of "evaluation expertise" if sufficient attention is not paid to understand the institutional context in which LEADER evaluation unfolds. Linear or complexity-based evaluation approach cannot be set up or discarded *a priori*. Some situations have revealed that linear thinking and accountability in LEADER evaluation can be considered as much useful as those approaches that seem to reflect or embody the complex nature of the programme. As experienced in this thesis, the utilization-focused lenses assist the scholars and evaluators to bring out and tackle the institutional background of the whole LEADER programme, as well as of its evaluation. Moving from LAG to LAG, this thesis re-assert that the utilization of evaluation is socially and institutionally constructed parameter to judge the overall evaluation business (Dahler-Larsen, 2011; Hallie Preskill, et al. 2003). In the case of LEADER, this construction has appeared to be highly influenced by several domains and forces, local and extra-local. The meeting with the "ground" level has positioned the utilization of the LEADER evaluation in dependence with not only the intentions expressible by the intended users (i.e. managers), but also with other situational variables related to the community, strategy, LEADER system, and the larger context, which build the argument that the LEADER evaluation cannot be considered simply as a managerial and technical exercise confined only for the "evaluator's expertise". Contrarily, the utilization of LEADER evaluation is a broader and multi-dimensional challenge in and of itself, which has not appeared to be separated by the organizational features of the LAG, the tacit and explicit characteristics of the Local Development Strategy, as well as from the "rural" community and place in which the LEADER programme intervenes. All these domains are not empty, nor disconnected entities, and invite scholars and practitioners to further investigate on their relation with the LEADER evaluation business.

As matter of fact, the LAGs are not simply the so-called "public-private partnerships" as described by the governmental regulations, but present several facets, with their own organizational mind-sets,

structures, experiences, virtues and limits. Similarly, the LDSs are not always conceivable as a given and standard set of activities and resources leading to expected outcomes and impacts, but often strategies present distinct elements, as for example the enthusiasm that it is devoted, the political and value conflicts which carries, or the convoluted encounter of contrasting stakes and views that it presents about the specific facets of "rural" managements. Furthermore, the community and the places are not only configured in terms of resources, assets, and beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries as written in the evaluation glossaries, but they have been described as space with social habits, values, and tensions which vary greatly from LAG to LAG. In addition, the LEADER system is not only made by the official rules, financial resources, and governmental documents, but also by the political discourses, values, public perceptions, and expectations flowing across different stakeholders, which in turn shape and are shaped by the way people conceive and conduct the intervention at the local level (included evaluation). Finally, the outside context of the LEADER system is not empty and aseptic, but intervenes with several forces and factors as the offer of better IT solutions, the dominance of evaluation consultants or universities, or the pressure of political lobbies over the LEADER programme.

This multi-faceted and interconnected arena implies that the future works on the LEADER evaluation approach should be made more institutionally conscious if they aim to be more influential, by recognizing and tackling the bundle of interconnections and the types of relations existing between all these domains. Moreover, to make the LEADER evaluation more useful, this thesis argues that "Evaluators" should become "Facilitators". The idea of evaluators as the "methodological experts" has proven to be partially responsive to the complexity of the utilization of LEADER evaluation (Figure 7). Evaluation cannot serve exclusively the needs and intentions of the LEADER system as policy initiative, without calling to a greater consideration for the characteristics of the community and the place, the LAG, and the LDS. With similar arguments, the evaluation should not pretend to circumscribe its enterprise to the assessment of the Local Development Strategy without scrutinizing and involving directly the LAG as unit of analysis. Everything should be seen as interconnected, which make the utility of evaluation proposals and practices as dependent variable to several institutional domains.

For making a good use of the LEADER evaluation, this thesis argues that better resources, governance mechanisms, and capacities need to be dedicated for facilitating the LEADER stakeholders to join all these domains together. For example, evaluators as facilitators could support the LAG to explore their own intentions first, and collaborate to meet these later. When intentions are about learning or developments, evaluators could mediate the interactions with the LAGs from other different geographical areas. When intentions of the LAGs mismatch with those of other stakeholders (upwards, horizontal, downwards), evaluators could contribute to find more synergies and reconciliations between, for example, the process use intended by the LAGs, and the evaluation findings required by the policy-makers. Rather than imposing one method over the others, or to favour the interests of the commissioners over third parties, evaluators could be more involved into a neutral role, helping the LAG to collaborate face-to-face with all stakeholders, to build a self-evaluation capacity in their own organization, the trust and relation with the community, as well as to solve critical conflicts and tensions within and with the LAGs.

In conclusion, this thesis calls for more studies and empirical experiences about the role of evaluators as facilitator for assembling different pieces and domains that make the LEADER evaluation approach more useful and influential. More research can be done to assess the institutional space and communication mechanisms that evaluators can use to facilitate the LAGs to think systematically through the interconnections between all these institutional domains. Moreover, further researcher can be conducted to design and assess the utilization of the LEADER evaluation (and evaluators) from a "relational perspective". This means to study how the evaluators facilitate the building of synergies and relations between multiple domains of actions, and how each of them shape the others, focusing for example between the LAG and the community, the LAG and other LAGs, the large LEADER system and the EU "rural" communities, the LAG and the Local Development Strategy, and so on. Given these sociological and institutional perspectives, this thesis concludes by posing two main research questions to be addressed for the purpose of increasing the utilization of the LEADER evaluation at all governance levels.

(1) Which institutional structures and mechanisms (e.g. incentives, reward, penalties) can be put in place to facilitate the alignment and synergies among the evaluation stakeholders from the same or at different levels of governance?
(2) Among the domains and forces displayed in Figure 7, which one influences in particular the design, implementation, and the final use of the LEADER evaluation, and how?

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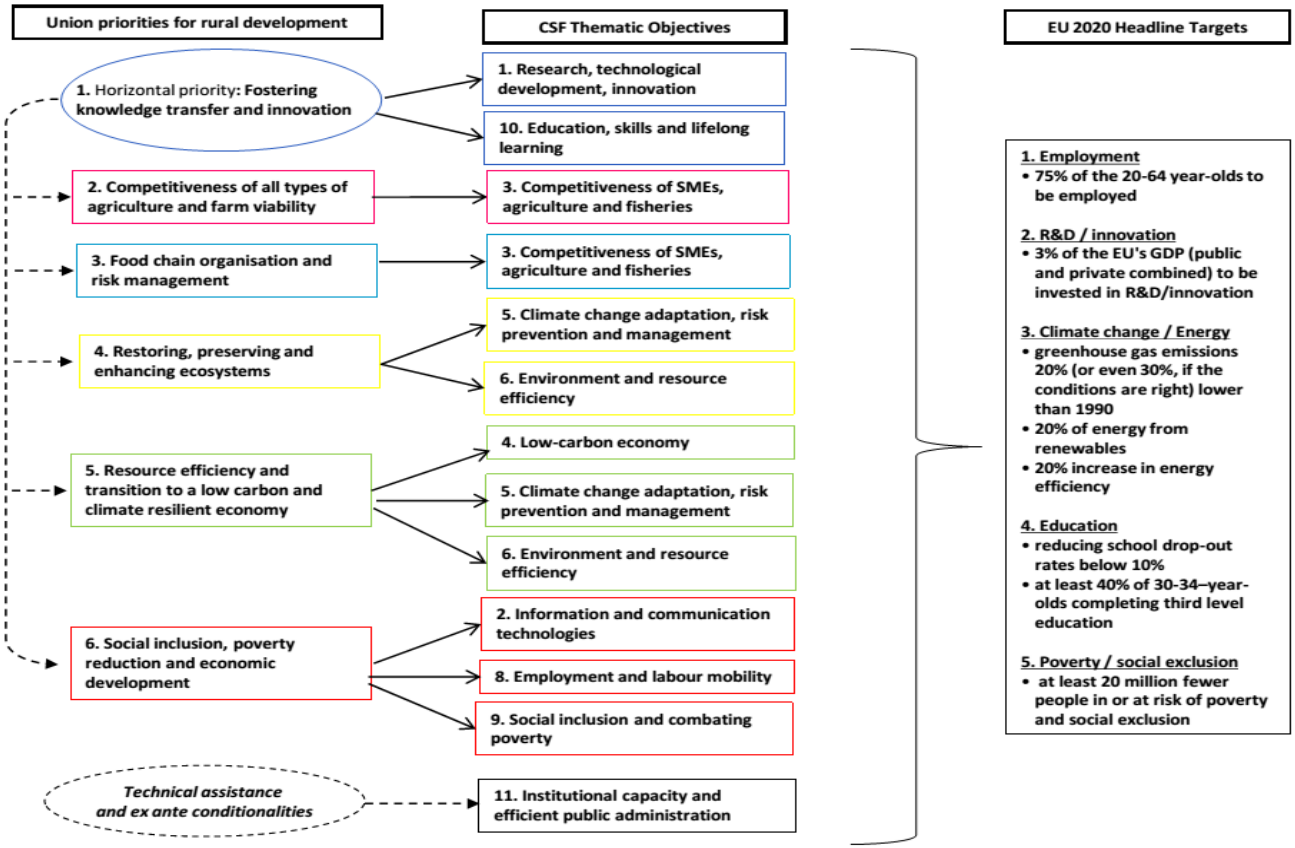
11. Annex

Table 5: Interview outline

A. General Information: • Working years of the manager in the LAG • Academic or professional background of the LAG's manager • Working years of the LAG • Main mission of the LAG's Local Development Strategy (LDS): • What is the relationship between the mission of the LDS and the evaluation? • Examples of previous evaluation experience
B. Leading questions for understanding the intentions of evaluation finding use: • How do you intend to use the findings of evaluation? (INDUCTIVE) • Which use could be more relevant for you and why? (INDUCTIVE) • What are the factors you encounter to achieve these uses? (INDUCTIVE) • What could be the relevance of this alternative use*? (DEDUCTIVE) ***Retrieved from Figure 2** 1. Judging the programme (Summative evaluation) 2. Understanding and improving the programme (Formative Evaluation) 3. Accountability 4. Monitoring 5. Developmental/Organization learning 6. Knowledge Generation ***C. Leading questions for understanding the intentions of evaluation process use:*** • How do you intend to use the process of evaluation? (INDUCTIVE) • What could be more relevant for you and why? (INDUCTIVE) • What are the factors you encounter to achieve these uses? (INDUCTIVE) • What could be the relevance of using the evaluation process for this alternative use* (DEDUCTIVE)? ***Retrieved from Figure 1** 1. Infusing evaluating thinking into the organizational culture 2. Enhancing shared understanding of the programme among programme participants 3. Supporting and reinforcing the programme intervention 4. Instrumentation 5. Increase engagement, self-determination, and ownership of community 6. Programme and organizational development ***D. Situational analysis***[8] • Related to these alternative *process* uses, what are the main organizational factors (evaluation and evaluator characteristics) you believe could constrain or enable your LAG to pursue them? • Related to these alternative *process* uses, what are the main relevant contextual factors (user and contextual characteristics) you believe could constrain or enable your LAG to pursue them?

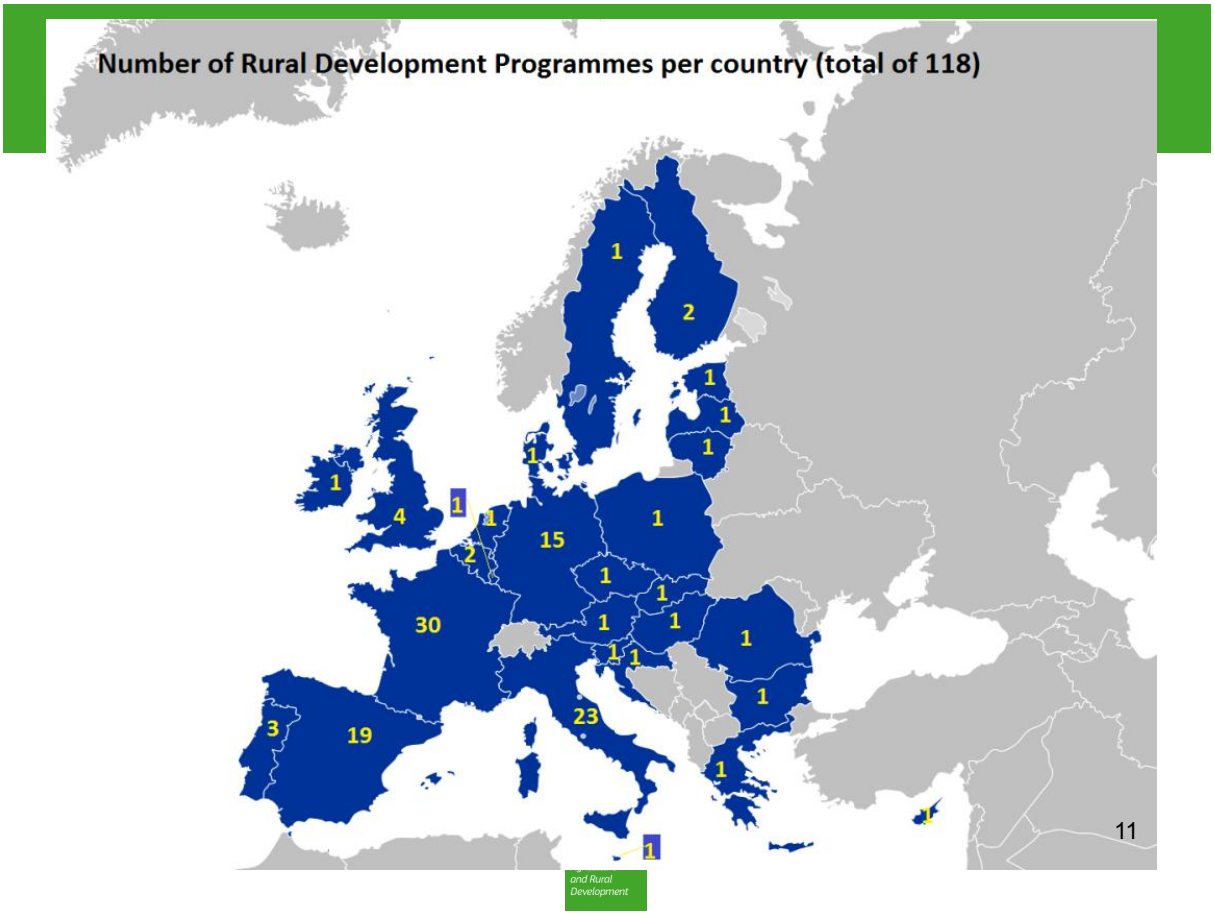
[8] From Burry et al. (1985)

Figure 8: Intervention Logic of EU RDP for the European Union Strategy 2020



Source: (European Commission**, 2016)**

Figure 9: Number of Rural Development Programmes per country approved in EU



Source: (European Commission, 2014c)

Table 6: EU Union Priorities for the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020

1.	Fostering knowledge transfer and innovation in agriculture, forestry and rural areas;
2.	Enhancing the viability and competitiveness of all types of agriculture, and promoting innovative farm technologies and sustainable forest management;
3.	Promoting food chain organisation, animal welfare and risk management in agriculture;
4.	Restoring, preserving and enhancing ecosystems related to agriculture and forestry;
5.	Promoting resource efficiency and supporting the shift toward a low-carbon and climate-resilient economy in the agriculture, food and forestry sectors;
6.	Promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas.

Source: EU Reg. 1305/2013