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Implementation of the EU LEADER programme at member-state level: Written and unwritten rules of local project selection in rural Poland

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ABSTRACT

Local Action Groups (LAGs) are multi-sectoral, area-based partnerships operating throughout the European Union to support participatory local development in rural areas. One of the operational elements of the programme is that multi-sectoral partnerships at the local level select and fund local development projects. The aim of this paper is to explore the dynamics of the selection process at the local level, paying attention to both exogenous and endogenous dynamics that originate at both the EU, national and local levels and how these influence the selection and funding of local development projects. We present the results of qualitative case studies conducted of 15 LAGs in rural Poland. Results indicate that centrally prescribed scoring criteria for the selection of projects issued are used, but, in many cases, local unwritten rules favouring territorial distribution of funds according to number of inhabitants and perceived fairness are highly influential on the selection process. We highlight in this context how local criteria shape top-down rules for the operationalisation of LEADER at the local level, illustrating features of mixed exogenous-endogenous development. We discuss how the interplay of local and external decision-making factors ultimately determine the activities of EU-funded development programmes, highlighting benefits of local decision-making in rural development but also signalling that EU procedures are realised to variable extents.

1. Introduction

In western democratic countries, the evolution of policy systems from hierarchies towards horizontal networks and co-operation has been observed since latter decades of the 20th century. There was a general tendency in the organization of production and state policies to change their features from vertical integration – oriented to high productivity and economies of scale – as a regime of accumulation, towards flexible cooperation networks with a greater role of local knowledge and bottom up processes in resource management (Jessop, 1995; Willis, 2005). This idea was understood in terms of the need to move from traditional vertical co-ordination to a horizontal approach, which means organizing through various co-operation networks, councils and associations (Campbell and Coulson, 2006). In reference to these trends, new processes of rural development have emerged in the last three decades which can be described as neo-endogenous (Ray, 2006). Neo-endogeneity emphasizes the notion of co-operative social relations,

especially how individuals and institutions focus on creating greater capacity to act by coming together in new forms (Shucksmith, 2010). Neo-endogenous rural development is based on the idea that socio-economic well-being can be achieved by restructuring public intervention away from individual sectoral interventions, designed by central authorities, in favour of a mosaic of local and regional territories managed bottom-up by cross-sectoral partnerships, which take into better consideration local conditions and needs (Adamski and Gorlach, 2007). The underlying logic is that development potential is rooted in local resources, and that local cooperation and networking is crucial for promoting place-based local development and social innovations (Neumeier, 2017). As Papadopoulou et al. (2011) noted with regard to LEADER projects (designed and implemented at the local level), they are less hierarchical than projects controlled from the top-down by state bodies.

In the European Union (EU), the main tool to implement organizational structures of territorial partnerships enhancing local development

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have been LEADER type initiatives, and other programmes implemented in Western Europe from the beginning of 1990s (Bryden, 2006; Moseley, 2003), continued under EU Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) approach (European Commission, 2014; Servillo and De Bruijn, 2018). In post-socialist EU new member states the partnership-based approach was implemented from the beginning of 21st century, mostly after EU accession (Chevalier, 2012; Gendźwiłł et al., 2020; Lošťák and Hudečková, 2010; Sykala et al., 2015). The spread of the approach in post-socialist EU Member States is perceived as an element of Europeanisation, largely prompted by EU policies (Dąbrowski, 2014; Gašior-Niemiec and Gliński, 2007; Székely, 2017). Cross-sectoral territorial partnerships, named Local Action Groups (LAGs) in the context of the LEADER programme, are important institutions operating at the local level, but structured and functioning according to EU rules. LAGs formalise cooperation and coordination between local stakeholders from the public, economic and social sector in partnerships (Esparcia et al., 2015; Thuesen, 2016). They receive financial support for the preparation of Local Development Strategies (LDS) and their implementation. LDS are operationalised by funding local actions (named ‘operations’ in LEADER Axis programme documents), on a competitive basis, with actions ranked and selected by LAGs (Futymski and Kamiński, 2008).

LAGs must adhere to certain EU LEADER programme rules, though these can be implemented variably in different contexts. Furthermore, considering the function of LAGs in taking an area-based approach to developing local resources, led by local actors, there are many subsidiary variations in how the programme operates in different territories. Thus, there are many analyses and discussions in the literature of how factors such as social capital and power relations impact localised approaches of LAGs (Cejudo and Navarro, 2020; Moseley, 2003; Macken-Walsh and Curtin, 2013; Zajda et al., 2017). However, receiving comparably less attention are the local influences, specifically on decisions regarding which actions are funded by LAGs. So far, there are few empirical studies focusing on the approaches and motives of LAGs at the local level. Most authors focus on the results or outcomes of these local processes, such as the typology of projects, their geographical distribution, and structures of public expenditure on local projects (e.g. Macken-Walsh, 2009; Biczkowski, 2020; Cañete et al., 2020; Masot and Alonso, 2018). However, it is by examining the decision-making processes that culminate in such outcomes that we gain insights to the logic of collective action locally, the local norms that shape it (March and Olsen, 1996) and, ultimately, the nature of the LEADER programme’s operationalisation in different territories.

The focus of the analysis presented in this paper is decision-making regarding funding of actions in rural Poland. We focus on how formal, external rules at the LEADER Axis (2007–2013) programme level and more informal, local norms and priorities interplay. In this paper we present evidence from qualitative research undertaken on the decision-making processes of fifteen Polish LAGs.

In the first section of the paper we analyse the theoretical foundations underpinning local partnerships, paying attention to differences between extra-local and local goals and referencing concepts of endogenous, exogenous and neo-endogenous development. Next, we present the methodological approach to qualitative research conducted in fifteen LAGs in Poland. We then present the results of our qualitative research, focusing first on the formal action assessment approaches for the selection of funded actions and second, on local dynamics influencing decision-making regarding the selection and funding of projects. We conclude with a discussion and conclusion.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. From distinction between “exogenous” and “endogenous” to intermediary “neo-endogenous” development

Rural policy in most of the European countries from the 1950s until

1970s was focused on supporting agricultural incomes and restructuring farm enterprises (Buunk et al., 1999). In this period, a hierarchical system of public resource management dominated, in pursuing exogenous development. Development targets and projects were defined and implemented centrally by government or governmental agencies, working in discrete sectoral areas such as agriculture, industry, transport, education in a non-integrated way (Fig. 1A). Such hierarchical and non-integrated sectoral policies could have a negative impact on development, and particularly in rural (also often peripheral) regions (Lošťák and Hudečková, 2010; Willis, 2005).

In response to observed inefficiencies and shortcomings of centralised top-down development models, policy experts and academics highlighted the need for new development strategies with better coordination and greater geographical concentration of budgetary resources (Buunk et al., 1999). The popularization of socio-economic models demonstrating and explaining the advantages of local cooperation in management of scarce resources (Ostrom, 1998) directed academics’ attention to concepts of endogenous development and territorial governance (Simard and Chiasson, 2008; Slee, 1994). Endogenous development identifies local cross-sectoral cooperation and bottom-up (grass-roots) actions as features leading to more efficient local and regional development policy that has greater capacity to fulfil local needs (Adamski and Górlach, 2007; Shucksmith, 2000). Officially acknowledged benefits of territorial governance (Stead, 2014) led policy-makers to facilitate the establishment and resourcing of various area-based partnerships (Freshwater et al., 1993; Peck and Tickell, 1994; Smith et al., 2006). The best known and most frequently analysed partnerships are the EU LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs), which early on were associated with the concept of endogenous development in the academic literature (Barke and Newton, 1997; Ray, 2000).

LAGs are cross-sectoral, area-based, horizontal partnerships involving public, private and third sector organizations (Canete et al., 2018; Servillo and De Bruijn, 2018). The territory of a LAG need not necessarily be an administrative region, but can be formed by a voluntary gathering of self-governing units in the functional region (Šaradin and Sulák, 2015; Székely, 2017). LAGs are forums for cooperation of different local stakeholders and for joint decision-making in relation to local development actions (Ray, 2006; Shucksmith, 2010). Echoing concepts of neo/endogenous development, they are perceived as more efficient in local service delivery; and for the mobilisation of communities’ local knowledge, interests and views (Moseley et al., 2001). LAGs develop local development strategies and in response, local actors who wish to do so prepare proposals to implement development actions. LAGs assess and select actions for funding (Fig. 1B).

In many European countries, national ‘copies’ of the LEADER programme have been implemented, such as ‘PRODER’ in Spain (Navarro et al., 2016a), ‘POMO’ in Finland (Wade and Rinne, 2008) and ‘Regionen Aktiv’ in Germany (Siebert and Dösch, 2005). These programmes aimed to promote self-improvement and self-determination among the rural populations involved (Díaz-Puente et al., 2008; Moseley, 2003). The general shift towards endogenous approaches to development policy catalysed further attention in the academic literature to differences between endogenous and exogenous development, and distinctions between bottom-up and top-down impetuses for socio-economic development (Bosworth and Atterton, 2012; Slee, 1994).

It is also acknowledged in the literature that both exogenous and endogenous development can potentially have negative features (Slee, 1994). While diversity in local potential and needs can serve as a driver of innovation (Konečný, 2019; Neumeier, 2017), such diversity may also hinder (or be irrelevant to) the achievement of supra-local goals, for instance those of ‘Europe 2020’ strategy (Adamski and Górlach, 2007; Furmankiewicz et al., 2020). Acknowledgement of this tension led to greater emphasis on the need to balance top-down and bottom-up development (Lowe and Murdoch, 2003). Concepts of network-based and neo-endogenous development emerged in that context (Lowe

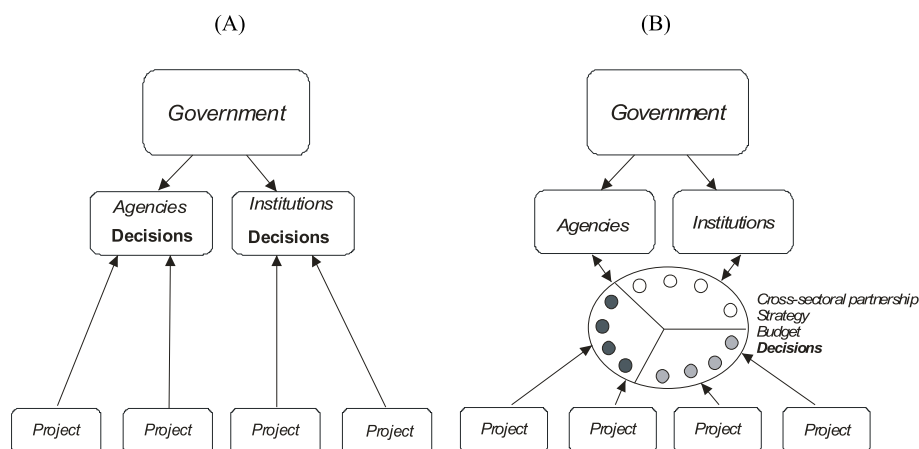


Fig. 1. Traditional sectoral policy of supporting local projects (A) and a bottom-up, integrated approach proposed by the concept of neo-endogenous development (B). Source: based on Kamiński and Kwaterna (2005).

et al., 1995; Ray, 2006), and an approach coined as ‘mixed endogenous-exogenous’ (Bosworth et al., 2016). The most important features of new policies inspired by the mixed endogenous-exogenous approach were: (1) increasing self-governing responsibilities of territories; (2) replacing the principle of administrative territory with the principle of functional territory; (3) cross-sectoral co-operation through networks and partnerships; (4) steering of bottom-up incentives through support programs and their eligibility rules (Böcher, 2008; Furmankiewicz, 2012). Such features have been often discussed in the literature related to LEADER Axis (2007–2013) and Community-Led Local Development (2014–2020) (Cejudo and Navarro, 2020).

2.2. Neo-endogenous development and europeanisation concepts

Wide implementation of the territorial governance concept through the creation of LAGs across the EU can be considered as a feature and driver of ‘Europeanisation’ (Ray, 2006; Székely, 2017). Radaelli (2004, p. 3) defines Europeanisation as “processes of (a) construction (b) diffusion and (c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ‘ways of doing things’ and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU public policy and politics and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies”. Implications and impacts of EU membership should thus be understood as potentially catalysing not only policy, structural, physical and material changes, but also intangible ideological effects, however gradual (Orbie and Carbone, 2016). EU programmes that delimit some main organizational features of LAGs and their operations, can be seen as a form of top-down Europeanisation (Börzel and Risse, 2003). According to Olsson (2003) EU norms orient the structure of LAGs (the partnership concept); operational and administrative rules of LAGs (consensus in decision-making, co-financing, transparency); and the nature of some organizational solutions (programme management and project selection councils). The aspirational scenario is that actors responsible for local development act in compliance with EU rules and structures (e.g. transparency in EU funds management, ensuring share of non-public stakeholders in project selection councils, social minorities inclusion idea), while pursuing their own local goals (Horký, 2010).

There is a discussion in the literature as to whether the LEADER type initiatives should allow local actors complete freedom in setting the goals and modus operandi of local development. Some authors suggest that the structure and the funding conditions of EU rural development programmes are excessively top-down approach, and they criticize the universalisation of its method and rules at the EU level (Navarro et al., 2016a, 2016b). Other authors argue that top-down support of bottom-up activities is a feasible and justifiable model in neo-endogenous

development (Böcher, 2008; Furmankiewicz, 2012; Ray, 2006).

The literature shows that expected operational features, results and impacts of the LEADER programme, such as the involvement of marginalised groups in the management of local resources, are not always realised in practice (Macken-Walsh, 2009, 2016). Problems frequently arise in processes of local cooperation, such as power relations causing, for example, public authorities taking dominant roles (Derksen et al., 2008; Falkowski, 2013; Marquardt et al., 2012); or public actors masquerading as NGO actors (Maurel, 2012; Furmankiewicz and Macken-Walsh, 2016; Navarro et al., 2016b). Sometimes LAGs favour personal associates and relatives in allocating funds (Arora-Jonsson, 2017) and projects of questionable quality are selected (European Court of Auditors, 2010). Such governance weaknesses can have been described as symptomatic of ‘shallow Europeanisation’ - where programme structures and rules are implemented only to the extent that local norms and customs of familist, clientelistic or patronage relations are not disrupted (Dąbrowski, 2008, 2012).

3. Methodology

Qualitative research was conducted on 15 LAGs in Poland, financed through the LEADER Axis, the 4th component of the Rural Development Programme (2007–2013) (named in this article shortly ‘LEADER Programme’), which was implemented on the ground from 2009 to 2015. This case study deliberately focuses on projects considered by LAGs during the 2007–2013 EU Programming Period, which was completed in 2015. We sought to focus on a programme and projects that were completed in an effort to gain insights in relation to the whole range of projects considered throughout a whole programming period. Furthermore, the authors believed that more honest responses were likely when interviews were focused on projects already completed and the programme evaluated, rather than those currently underway. In this paper we use the name ‘commune’ for the basic unit of administrative division in Poland (*gmina* in Polish, also translated as ‘municipality’; EU LAU-2 statistical units), which have democratically elected local government (Kachniarz et al., 2019; Swianiewicz, 2014).

In the period of programme implementation there were 336 LAGs in Poland, located in rural communes and small towns inhabited by a total of 10,000–150,000 thousand people. Urban communes with over 5000 inhabitants and towns above 20,000 inhabitants in urban-rural communes could not participate in the LEADER Programme (Chmieliński, 2011; Futymski and Kamiński, 2008; Sykała et al., 2015). On average, 6 communes (from 1 to 23) participated in one LAG in Poland, the average area was about 870 square km, and the average population was 54,000 (Furmankiewicz, 2018). Project Selection Councils (called also ‘Decision-Making Councils’ in other articles; see e.g. Furmankiewicz and

Macken-Walsh 2016; Navarro et al., 2016a), which selected actions for funding, had from 4 to 42 members (an average of 15 members, but the most frequently occurring 12 ones). In official declarations of membership of Councils, the share of public sector membership did not exceed 50%, but in a previous study of Polish LAGs it is indicated that in 53% of LAGs, public sector members comprised between 51 and 92% of Council membership (Furmankiewicz and Macken-Walsh, 2016; Furmankiewicz, 2018).

To select LAGs on which to conduct research, we used non-probability purposive sampling, which is an established method in qualitative case studies. The aim of non-probability purposive sampling is to explore phenomena i.e. to discover *casus* without estimating the frequency of their appearance (Babbie, 2011). Qualitative studies of LAGs based on analyses of several to a dozen or so surveyed units or persons are frequent in the literature (Derksen et al., 2008; Nardone et al., 2010; Thuesen, 2011). The selection of the sample for our analysis was deliberate (purposive) and adopted a-priori. Our aim was to assess how actions were selected by Councils for funding, and a critical feature of Councils in this regard is their multi-sector membership. For this research, thus, we focused on the multi-sector membership of LAG Project Selection Councils (PSCs), paying attention to the extent of public sector representation in their membership. Previous research has found that the public sector is typically over-represented in LAG PSCs in Poland (Furmankiewicz and Macken-Walsh, 2016), hence we focused on the balance between public and other sector representation in Council membership as a first step in selecting cases to analyse. Using a classification, based on the concept of functional representation, used in the literature (Vieira and Runciman, 2008), we classified all heads of communes, commune officials and managers of public entities reporting directly to commune authorities as representatives of the public sector, regardless of declarations that they represented other sectors.

Selection of cases was based on the membership composition of PSCs: 5 LAGs with high participation of officials and commune heads/mayors (public sector) in councils (82–92%); 5 LAGs with balanced membership (33%–50% public sector membership); and 5 LAGs with low public sector participation (7–13%). In each group there were LAGs from the three main historical-cultural regions of Poland (Bład and Kamiński, 2005). Analysed LAGs were inhabited by 11–130 thousand people. There were from 1 to 10 communes (municipalities) engaged in cooperation. The PSCs consisted of from 8 to 20 members. As shown in Table 1, Councils dominated by the public sector were typically larger in area and number of inhabitants, but they had on average smaller numbers of Council members.

In each of the LAGs, telephone interviews were conducted with three individuals who participated in the PSCs from 2011 to 2014. We attempted to interview representatives of different sectors (one from each of the public sector, third and private sectors). However, this was not possible in all cases, because the engagement of the private sector was low (sometimes 1–2 persons) so in the case of refusal of the interview or no contact, it was not possible to find another person with such characteristics. A total of 45 interviews were conducted, obtaining open answers on formal and informal approaches for the selection of local

development actions for funding. Most responses were written down manually during the interviews, as respondents refused to record the conversations.

The mode of analysis employed was qualitative description defined as reporting ‘the facts, and the meanings participants give to those facts’ (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 336). Employing this approach, patterns in the data are identified in the data under a selection of headings under which the data can be comprehensively and logically presented. Consistent with a qualitative descriptive approach (Sandelowski, 2000), a fixed interpretive framework wasn’t used to analyse the data - instead patterns were identified across the qualitative dataset and our aim was to report a summation of those patterns. The interview notes were analysed manually, identifying patterns across them. To identify and trace the patterns, coding was used. No pre-set codes were applied in the analysis, rather the codes were ‘data derived’ (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 338), which means that authors together interpreted the data to first identify and then revise final codes that described patterns in the data. Excerpts from the data relevant to a pattern were given a code name (Tracy, 2013). We identified all data (and patterns) in the dataset to answer our research question – what are rules used to select and fund local development projects? We paid attention to both rules originating externally (written exogenous rules) and those originating internally in PSCs (written and unwritten endogenous rules), and how they interplayed.

4. Results

4.1. The analysis of formal selection rules described in strategy documents

All LAG Project Selection Councils applied the assessment procedures based on EU rules and issued by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (Futymski and Kamiński, 2008), even though they were described as non-legally binding recommendations. In accordance with the prescribed assessment procedures, local stakeholders applied a two-step method of evaluating local applications (called ‘operations’ in the programme). Initially, the application had to meet minimum administrative requirements (e.g. application type, cost threshold). Subsequently, in the first stage, Council members assessed the suitability of applications to the objectives and tasks set out in the Local Development Strategy (LDS). To assess this, individual Council members completed assessment sheets. A project was considered compliant with the LDS when it was first compatible with at least one general objective, at least one specific objective and at least one task determined in LDS. An application that was found by the majority of Council members to be incompatible with the objectives and tasks of the LDS was not further evaluated. Projects assessed as compatible with the LDS were submitted for further evaluation, decided on the basis of absolute majority of Council members.

In the second evaluation phase, Council members assessed the projects according to criteria identified in the LDS, assigning each project a points with respect to each of the criteria, examples of which are presented in Table 2. Due to the different objectives and orientation of the four main components of the LEADER Programme (village renewal and

Table 1
Basic data in relation to LAG Project Selection Councils (PSCs).

	LAG PSCs with membership dominated by public sector (5 units)	LAG PSCs with balanced membership (5 units)	LAG PSCs with membership dominated by non-public sectors (5 units)
LAGs area – mean in square km	834	665	267
Number of member municipalities – mean	6.8	4.2	2.2
Number of inhabitants - mean	67,052	26,598	34,647
Number of partners - mean	44.8	51.6	50.4
Number of project selection committee members – mean	10.8	10.8	12.6
Public sector workers real share in decision council [%] – mean	89	37.5	10
‘Hidden’ public sector [%] – mean ^a	47	7	4.5

^a Heads of communes, commune officials (clerks) and managers of public entities reporting directly to commune authorities who declared to be representatives of the third or private sector. Source: Authors’ research.

development, diversification into non-agricultural activities, creation and development of micro-enterprises and so-called small projects) different sets of criteria were used to assess projects' compatibility. Some criteria related to simple numerical factors (e.g. the number of inhabitants of the town where the project is based, the number of local entities cooperating in the project, the beneficiary's financial contribution etc.). Other sets of criteria were open to more subjective assessment (e.g. the potential impact of the project on the development of culture in the area, assessment of the beneficiary's level of experience in project implementation). Individual Council members awarded points for each of the sets of criteria and the average number of points was calculated. On this basis, a ranked list of projects was created. Funding was allocated to all projects on the ranked list, beginning with the project ranked first, until the available budget was fully allocated.

The framework of this evaluation procedure is provide by the LEADER Programme and in this sense can be considered as 'top-down', written rules (Table 3). According to the rules of the program included in the strategies, the allocation of funds should be the result of a competition. For instance, it was not possible for LAGs to allocate funding to projects in an alternative way, for instance to balance funding allocations proportionally across villages or communes, without competition. However, the evaluation criteria themselves and their weightings were determined 'bottom up' by LAGs, who were authors of the LDSs.

4.2. The analysis of informal selection rules and power relations

All 45 interviewees reported that criteria listed in the strategies were applied in selection projects processes. However, 30 (of the total 45) interviewees reported that in assessing projects, they tried to allocate funds more or less proportionately for each commune, with 15 claiming that they chose projects regardless of their geographical location. Interviewees explained:

"Attempts were typically made to give to each commune a proportionate number of funds for projects; representatives of authorities negotiated while giving points; it is obvious that it did not function freely". (the head of a communal social welfare centre declared as a representing the third sector in a LAG dominated by the public sector).

"We tried to ensure that each commune could use the funds; the communes negotiated, especially in the case of village revitalization". (an employee of a local NGO representing the third sector in a LAG with balanced sectoral membership).

It was clear from the interviews that commune authorities could frequently negotiate with each other with regard to points awarded to project applications, in an effort to distribute funding proportionately across communes. This negotiation concerned almost exclusively the village renewal category of projects in the LDSs, which supports projects for developing local infrastructure and public facilities. In such cases,

commune authorities they collectively agreed in advance that they would apply for funds approximately in proportion to the number of inhabitants within the communes: *"Each commune had its own pool of funds, which one could apply for. Only when the number of projects exceeded the funds for the commune was the criterion by points employed; it was such an arrangement between the local government"*. (a commune councillor representing the public sector in a LAG dominated by the public sector).

Importantly, this custom was not officially announced in documents - it was informal in nature - but was followed by cooperating commune authorities. In one LAG, an attempt to break out of this informal rule was deliberately blocked:

"The funds were divided into pools for each commune. Once it happened that the commune leader [of commune A] did not manage to use his pool on time, so the commune leader [of commune B] wanted to get more, because there were a lot of projects there. There was a quarrel between the commune leaders but in the end [commune A] made an effort and managed to use its funds". (a village leader representing the third sector in a LAG with balanced multi-sector membership).

Informal agreements regarding the distribution of funds prior to the submission of applications was typically led by public sector representatives. Their negotiations and enforcement of their agreements were made all the more possible considering their close working relationships within a small social network. In other LDS categories, such as 'small projects' or 'diversification of activities towards non-agricultural activities' and 'micro-enterprises', beneficiaries were typically non-public actors, such as local NGOs, farmers, and private sector actors. These are diverse and scattered actors, unlike public sector actors, which would predicate against informal negotiation processes in advance of project applications. Where small and diversification projects are concerned, interviewees did not report proportionate distribution of funds, however, some emphasized that they tried to ensure that each and every commune had a funded project;

"On the whole, we tried to ensure that each commune got something in each category of projects; it was a kind of gentlemen's agreement". (a shop owner representing the private sector in a LAG with balanced multi-sector membership).

In a few cases, the local norm was to try to approximately equal allocate resources according to geographical criteria so that all communes would benefit:

"We tried to ensure that each village plucked something, so that no one would be harmed". (a village leader representing the third sector in a LAG dominated by the third sector).

"In general, we selected the best applications, but we also tried to ensure that individual villages received something at least once, to avoid a situation where everything would end up in a single place". (a commune leader's deputy representing the public sector in a LAG dominated by the third sector).

Table 2
Sample criteria used for PSCs' scoring of projects in the examined LAGs.

Assessment method - rating scale (points)	Examples of evaluation criteria (written rules publicly announced)
Higher- better valuation (range 1–3 points)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Percentage of the beneficiary's own contribution ● The operation is complementary to other operations carried out in the field of local development strategy implementation ● The operation affects the promotion of the area ● The operation will contribute to the development of culture ● Benefits or range of impacts of the operation on LAG area ● Number of local entities involved in the project ● Level of local community involvement ● Beneficiary's own work contribution ● Creation of new jobs
Lower – better valuation (range 1–3 points)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The size of the town/village where the project is implemented (targeted support for small villages)
Yes – better valuation (Yes or No, 1/0 points)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The applicant is a member of the LAG ● The operation is innovative ● The activity concerned by the operation is based on the use of local resources or local heritage ● Experience of applicant in implementing projects financed by the EU

Source: Authors' research.

Table 3

Exogenous (top-down) written and endogenous (bottom-up) written and unwritten ‘rules’ determining project selection by LAG PSCs for LEADER Axis (2007–2013) in Poland. Acronyms: LDS - Local Development Strategy; PSC – Project Selection Council; LAG – Local Action Group.

Written top-down rules (issued by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development) (Futymski and Kamiński, 2008)	Written bottom-up rules compliant with the top-down rules (defined according to the content of locally formulated LDSs with the participation of representatives of local communities, approved by the general meeting of LAG members and by regional public authorities)	Unwritten bottom-up rules, often inconsistent with publicly announced written rules (informal negotiations and influences on allocation of funding, according to local customs, power tensions and perceived fairness)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Two-step assessment (first, evaluate suitability to the LDS; second, score (awarding points) to evaluate each criterion) ● Calculate the average points score for each individual application from PCS members’ individual assessments ● Create a ranked list and allocate funding to highest scoring projects, utilising the available budget. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Determine assessment criteria for assessing projects’ suitability to the LDS a group of local criteria that are subject to scoring. ● Assign points (varying scales) for each individual criterion ● PSC members individually score projects ● Scores are averaged and projects ranked ● Highest scoring projects awarded funding, until expiry of funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Public authorities negotiating proportionate distribution of village amenity project funding across territories, before application submission, to make the award of funds independent of the competition considered by PSCs; ● Public sector representatives dominating PSCs, and negotiating project scoring enabling proportionate distribution of project funding across territories; ● Local communities representatives following the logic that it is fair to distribute funding to smaller and diversification projects across territories, leaving no project out, independently from project quality; ● Informal pressure was exerted on highly effective communes applying for disproportionately high funds to give up and give a chance to implement weaker projects from less active communes;

Source: Authors’ research.

As can be seen, then, in many places, the distribution of funds was based on territorial units and the number of inhabitants within them. In the investigated sample, the criterion of proportionate selection of all projects (in all categories) according to territorial units was more evident in Councils with relatively balanced multi-sector membership. An absence of this proportionate approach to awarding funding was most evident in Councils dominated by non-public sectors.

It was also evident from the interviews that historically, particular areas could have more influence than others on the selection of projects. This was particularly so where Councils were dominated by the public sector representatives advocating to different extents for their territories. In order to avoid over-representation from any one area in Councils, often agreement were introduced by local stakeholders for the formation of Councils to ensure even geographical representation. The first rule ensured an even number of people from each commune in Councils:

“In our council, there were two people from each commune to make it fair”. (an employee of a communal library as the social sector in a commune with balanced structures).

A second rule related to representation of communes based on the number of inhabitants of communes:

“When the council was being formed, the number of representatives was established proportionately to the number of inhabitants in the member communes, so the large communes were theoretically the most powerful ones in the council”. (a commune official declared as representing the third sector in a LAG dominated by local authorities).

Although the analysis presented in this paper relates to written and unwritten rules determining Councils’ allocations of LEADER funding to projects, our data also captured other dynamics, frequently reported in the literature, regarding how LEADER operates on the ground (Furmankiewicz and Macken-Walsh, 2016; Kováč and Kučerová, 2006; Macken-Walsh, 2016; Osti, 2000). The influence of actors, dominant in Councils due to their local status or simply their personality was noted:

“There were communes with greater ability to push themselves forward, but it was rather the result of the dominant character of some individual representatives, especially mayors and commune leaders”. (a commune official representing the third sector in a LAG dominated by the public sector).

It was also evident from our data, similar to other studies of LEADER, that some areas were stronger when it came to submitting applications, perhaps due to varying structures and cultures of innovation across communes:

“Some communes are larger, others smaller, there are always differences. In the council, there was one person from each commune, so no one was more powerful there. But when it came to submitting small applications, there could be differences. In [commune X] there were efficient associations from the beginning, and in my commune there were none at all”. (a commune secretary as a representative of the social sector in a LAG dominated by the public sector).

Combined with such dynamics, our analysis identifies two main regimes of unwritten rules where decision-making for the allocation of funding is concerned. The first is a broad tendency for public sector representatives to allocate funding for village renewal project across communes, taking into consideration the population size of communes. This tendency was more pronounced in Councils dominated by public sector actors. The focus of public sector actors on village renewal projects is not surprising considering such projects are often associated with their roles as public servants in charge of municipal facilities, but also in the context of under-developed infrastructure in some rural Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) areas. The prioritisation of local public amenities, services and facilities in CEE local development projects has been noted in the literature elsewhere (Furmankiewicz and Campbell, 2019; Macken-Walsh and Curtin, 2013). The second regime was an attempt to distribute funding to smaller and diversification projects ‘fairly’ across communes, so as not to leave any commune out. These attempts were made not only by public sector representatives, but also those representing the third and private sectors. In a context where free-market norms are relatively recent by comparison to the context of established Western liberal democratic regimes, it cannot be assumed that allocation of funding to the ‘best’ projects (locally assessed according to local criteria) are the only ones deserving of funding. While Western-conceived projects such as LEADER, strive to promote the most innovative projects, often in the most innovative regions, can be perceived as deserving of more funding. In CEE, on the other hand, where such values are not as embedded, the logic of funding only the most innovative projects in the most innovative regions, can be less supported and rejected in favour of supporting all territories equally. These localised but widespread regimes and forms of logic influencing how LEADER funding is allocated to projects in rural Poland indicates that the framework for selecting funding projects at EU level is being applied only to a certain extent. This raises interesting questions about how neo-endogenous development works in practice and, in that context, how Europeanisation processes are likely to take root.

5. Discussion

Our analysis identifies the interplay between exogenous and endogenous factors in how LEADER is implemented on the ground, arguably as a model of mixed exogenous-endogenous development as articulated in the existing literature. First, exogenous rules formulated at national level, following to EU bureaucratic demands, prescribe that projects are scored according to criteria aligned with objectives and tasks of LDSs; and are allocated funding according solely on the basis of scores. Following this EU approach, the most important criterion relates to the quality of the project and transparency in how projects are selected. This assessment framework, however, is neo-endogenous in the sense that the LDSs, although focused on areas of action (village renewal, micro-enterprises, smaller projects, diversification) prescribed by LEADER, are formulated at the local level, taking into account local conditions, challenges and development opportunities. Furthermore, criteria used to score project applications are also formulated at the local level, customised to LDSs. What the analysis of this paper uncovers, however, are regimes of unwritten rules that are not accounted for in this mixed exogenous-endogenous framework. These unwritten rules are motivated by (successful) attempts to distribute funding in such a way that is territorially proportionate, whether according to size of communes or attempting fairness in not leaving any commune out. For local stakeholders, an important consideration is who is deserving of and receives funding, rather than solely considerations regarding the quality of the project based on uniform scoring criteria. An important question in this context is whether, acknowledging the negative pitfalls of clientelism (Furmankiewicz and Macken-Walsh, 2016), the logic underpinning the unwritten rules of local communities has merit.

While the authors are aware of no comparable studies that explicitly focus on local decision-making with regard to LEADER funding allocation, situating our analysis in the literature on how LEADER is implemented at member state level elsewhere in Europe sheds more light on the processes ultimately shaping LEADER as a neo-endogenous or mixed exogenous-endogenous development model. The tendency to evenly distribute funds among member communes, possibly proportional to the number of inhabitants was also found in case studies in the Czech Republic (Maurel, 2012). The recommendation to provide support to “a bit of everyone” in programmes activating local communities, and not only to a small group of the most effective stakeholders, is known from the literature (Schumacher, 1973). On the other hand, it was observed in Spain, that more ‘dynamic’ or innovative territories often receive more investments from LEADER type support programmes, leaving out less developed ones (Macken-Walsh, 2009; Masot and Alonso, 2018). In such a context, it is arguable that if funding were to be proportionately allocated according to the number of inhabitants in territories (the strategy employed by several of the Councils analysed in our study), it would address inequalities in favouring more innovative territories.

Criteria favouring the implementation of projects in small, less developed areas are noted in Spain (Canete et al., 2018), and specifically in Andalusia, where local managers were of the view that “uneven geographical assignment and territorial distribution” is one of the key problems where implementation of LEADER is concerned (Navarro et al., 2016a). The unwritten rules of the Polish LAG Project Selection Councils analysed in this paper go some way in addressing unevenness in development support, and arguably highlights the operationalisation of more ‘locally logical’ mixed exogenous-endogenous development.

The unwritten rules uncovered in the analysis of this paper also indicates the occurrence of shallow Europeanisation. EU bureaucratic rules are often considered locally as an inconvenient necessity (Arora-Jonsson, 2017). Research by Dąbrowski (2012) indicates that public sector actors especially often tokenistically adapt their existing activities to secure funding, avoiding change and introducing new practices, like genuine third sector participation in the management of public resources. Similarly Pasquier (2005) showed that territorial policies implement European standards only to the extent that existing practices

accommodate. Consistent with Bieber (2019), who found that EU rules are being implemented differently depending on the context, Europeanisation must be discussed in its spatial context (Clark and Jones, 2008; Fricke, 2019; Moisiso et al., 2013). Territorial economic, social and cultural conditions and planning practices and development management ultimately and variably shapes Europeanisation. Mixed exogenous-endogenous approaches frame this variability in how various EU contexts and conditions determine the interplay between formal and informal rules.

The context of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) provides a distinctive context for mixed exogenous-endogenous development and Europeanisation. Maurel (2012), with reference to the example of Czech LAGs, noted that the emergence of multi-municipal multi-sectoral partnerships did not mean a shift in managing development away from local elected officials. The ‘project class’, identified by Kováč and Kučerová (2006), involve those adept at and experienced in formulating and implementing proposals – including public sector employees. It was found elsewhere that public sector dominance, commonplace in CEE, may have adverse effects on the functioning and effectiveness of LAGs (Mrnjavac and Perić, 2020). Marquardt et al. (2012); Maurel (2012); Furmankiewicz and Macken-Walsh (2016) - all found public sector dominance in how LAGs operate on the ground in CEE, citing for instance that it is the ‘natural role’ of publicly funded employees to take leadership roles in local and community development (Macken-Walsh and Curtin, 2013). Our analysis in this paper, focusing specifically on the allocation of LEADER funding, shows that Councils with balanced multi-sector membership are less susceptible to unwritten rules than Councils dominated by public sector actors. However, the nature of the role of public sector actors in LAGs is not an issue that is exclusive to CEE. Electoral conditions in democratic regimes motivate public sector actors to serve and favour for their territorial units, unlike LAG members who are representing of third and private sectors and don’t have a territorial mandate. This illustrates an interesting paradox in Europeanisation process: that public actors whose roles are often tied to and influenced by EU institutions and policies, are those who often act as territorialising agents.

6. Conclusions

Successive EU policies place greater emphasis on replicating the local, multi-sector partnership model across an increasing swathe of policy areas, ranging from climate action to technology to medicine – such as through the European Innovation Partnerships. Within agriculture and rural development, member states are encouraged to use the partnership model in Regional Development Programmes (Dąbrowski, 2008), Community-Led Local Development (Servillo and De Bruijn, 2018; Zajda et al., 2017) and European Innovation Partnership (Macken-Walsh, 2016). Therefore, there is a continuing need to uncover the exogenous and endogenous dynamics shaping the implementation and ultimately impacts of the partnership approach on the ground. A key activity of virtually all partnerships is the allocation of funding to selected projects, thus the findings of this paper are universal to contexts where a partnership approach to supporting development is taken. The issues raised in this study can also be considered in the broader context of adopting and consolidating European standards in the activities of local communities, or Europeanisation. This is especially important in some post-socialist Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) where there is growing Euroscepticism and tendencies towards illiberal democracy.

We are aware from the literature that multi-sector partnerships encounter various types of problems in their operation (see e.g.: Chmieliński et al., 2018; Pawłowska, 2017; Zajda, 2014). Our analysis evidences unwritten but widespread rules favouring allocation of funding proportionately and fairly across territories rather than on the basis of project application scores, which is the procedure prescribed at EU level. This confirms that local criteria may bind how the objectives of

LEADER may be realised. However, the use of local criteria in the cases we studied also had the effect of addressing potentially uneven development support by favouring more innovative regions, a concern highlighted in several studies of LEADER.

The model of mixed exogenous-endogenous local development identified in this paper reveals how the Europeanisation process is playing out. The phenomena at play in the interplay between written and unwritten rules are rarely visible in formal reports and reports profiling EU projects. Rules and norms passed on from above represent a formal framework for LAG operations, but where decisions that significantly impact the local community are concerned, local criteria for project selection are widespread and powerful. This shows the legitimacy and sway of 'locally logical' mixed exogenous-endogenous development, which drives Europeanisation in accordance with subsidiary priorities and needs. This need not be regarded as negative, but rather illustrative of the realistic mosaic of diverse influences that must shape development in order for it to be effective and logical as locally perceived, representing more legitimate Europeanisation. The research presented in this paper brings additional information to the literature on informal mechanisms emerging in grassroots resource management. It also signals key areas for further research, such as the role of (shifting) norms at the local level, in how sustainable local development – the core aim of LEADER – is both first aspired towards and then operationalised. Examinations of power dynamics at the local level and associated social networks will further elucidate the context in which these norms exist and are replicated. Furthermore, a geographical study taking into account the socio-economic contexts of areas in which projects are funded, would shed light on how equitable the distribution of LEADER funding is territorially.

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