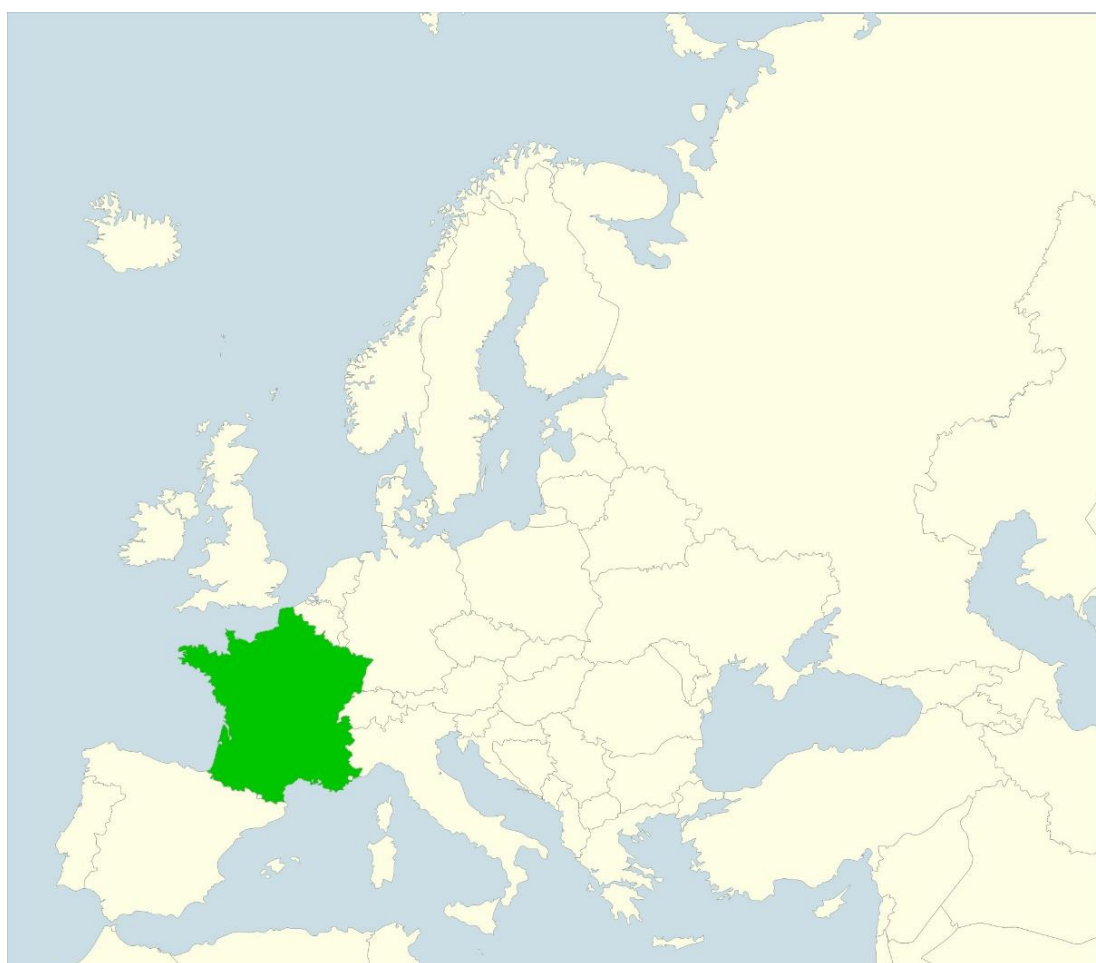


PRINCIPLES OF LOCAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE EUROPEAN LEADER PROGRAMME APPLIED TO FISHING AREAS: WHAT ARE THE SPECIFIC FEATURES? COMPARATIVE APPROACH OF TWO LAGS IN FRANCE

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Abstract: The article focuses on the implementation of the European LEADER program in the specific context of fishing areas. Complementing the European Common Fisheries Policy, whose sectoral objective is to preserve fishery resources while ensuring economic competitiveness, this program introduces a cross-cutting and territorialized approach to development. It thus offers local Stakeholders greater legitimacy in implementing development actions and greater freedom to choose their development strategy by financing projects where the sectoral dimension takes a back seat to more territorial and cross-cutting issues. Beyond the traditional sectoral axes, the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund thus supports the sustainable development of areas dependent on fishing and aquaculture, in line with the local development approach and within the framework of participatory mechanisms. Although this approach has only recently been applied in fishing areas (unlike in rural areas, where it was established in 1991), the international scientific community has already shown keen interest in the issue, particularly through empirical research. However, although these studies provide valuable insights into the successes and failures of implementing the LEADER program specifically in fishing areas, comparative research between “traditional rural” LEADER and “fishing” LEADER is very rare. The aim is therefore to address this gap by analyzing, within the same region, the differences and similarities in the application of the LEADER approach across fishing and rural areas. Using a comparative framework based on statistical and cartographic analysis of projects carried out during the 2014-2020 period in two local action groups in the Hérault department in France (one rural, the other linked to fishing), the paper aims to show that the socio-economic structures of the territories influence the different ways in which the LEADER approach is implemented.

Keywords: rural development, LEADER, Common Fisheries Policy, Occitanie, Hérault, local governance, France

Résumé: L'article s'intéresse à la mise en œuvre du programme européen LEADER dans le cadre spécifique des territoires de la pêche. En complément de la Politique européenne Commune de la Pêche dont l'objectif sectoriel, est de préserver les ressources halieutiques tout en garantissant la compétitivité économique, ce programme introduit une approche transversale et territorialisée du développement. Il offre ainsi aux acteurs locaux une plus grande légitimité dans la mise en œuvre d'actions de développement et une plus grande liberté dans le choix de leur stratégie de développement par le financement de projets où la dimension sectorielle s'estompe devant des enjeux plus territoriaux et transversaux. Au-delà des axes sectoriels classiques, le Fonds Européen des Affaires Maritimes et de la Pêche accompagne ainsi le développement durable des zones tributaires de la pêche et de l'aquaculture selon l'approche du développement Local dans le cadre de dispositifs participatifs. Même si l'application de cette démarche est relativement récente dans les territoires de la pêche (contrairement aux territoires ruraux pour lequel elle a été traditionnellement créée en 1991), la communauté scientifique internationale s'est déjà largement intéressée à la question, notamment au travers de recherches empiriques. Toutefois, bien que ces études fournissent des résultats précieux sur les réussites et les échecs de la mise en œuvre du programme LEADER spécifique aux territoires de pêche, les recherches comparatives entre LEADER « rural traditionnel » et LEADER « pêche » sont très rares. L'objectif est alors de pallier ce manque en analysant, dans une même région, les différences et similitudes possibles dans l'application de l'approche LEADER entre les zones de pêche et les zones rurales. A partir d'un cadre comparatif, basé sur l'analyse statistique et cartographique des projets réalisés au cours de la période 2014-2020 dans deux groupes d'action locale du département du département de l'Hérault en France (l'un rural, l'autre lié à la pêche) le papier vise à montrer que les structures socioéconomiques des territoires influent sur les modalités différenciées de mise en œuvre de la démarche LEADER.

Mots clés: développement rural, politique commune de la pêche, Occitanie, Hérault, gouvernance locale, France

Highlights

- A strong relationship between the configuration of the steering committee and the results in terms of project orientation and public policy.
 - The fishing industry demonstrates greater economic resilience when it is part of a FLAG.
 - The reputation of the LEADER label makes the fishing industry less vulnerable.
 - The LEADER approach have fostered cooperation between local areas at various levels.
 - The LEADER method has led to higher levels of innovation, particularly the social one.
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1. Introduction

European agricultural policies over the last 30 years have seen changes in rural areas both in terms of the transformation of agriculture, the consideration of environmental issues and, more broadly, the diversification of activities. Measures focused exclusively on promoting food production and those linked to farming and livestock activities have been broadened towards multifunctionality and more broadly towards rural development (Hernández, 2008). The gradual decoupling of aid linked to agricultural production in favour of rural development, combined with the growing importance of the second pillar of the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP), has resulted in the application of regional and national initiatives and programmes with a territorial approach (Bosworth et al., 2020; Sáenz and Cejudo, 2008). The change in the direction of European policies has materialised mainly at the operational level through the LEADER/ Community Initiative. Since the 1990s, rural development has been implemented using a methodology that advocates a model of participatory public action, moving away from traditional models of political and democratic intervention.

These endogenous development models began to be applied in fishing areas from the 2007-2013 period. With these changes, the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) is attempting to tackle the sectoral problems of the fisheries sector with a more territorial vision (Laidin and Berriet-Sollic, 2016. Ceccacci, A. 2021). The depletion of fisheries resources, the reduction in fishing quotas, environmental problems, the lack of generational renewal among fishermen, as well as social problems in areas heavily dependent on fishing, are now being tackled by the European authorities with a local approach, which implies a change from a sector-based, centralised, productivist model to a post-productivist model that takes account of local factors.

The integration of new tertiary activities to improve the income and social benefits of fishing communities, such as maintaining villages, integrating women into the world of work and recovering heritage features, obviously requires public sector support. New formulas for managing fishing communities have emerged through the endogenous development models proposed by the European Union (Kyvelou and Ierapetritis, 2020; Romeo and Marcianò, 2019). The implementation of the LEADER approach will, a priori, improve the competitiveness of the fisheries sector, diversify the uses of small-scale fishing, make fishing areas more attractive and generate additional income for coastal territories. A more open vision, by integrating other sectors such as tourism, gastronomy, local businesses, renewable energy production, or scientific research at sea, would enable fishing problems to be tackled from other perspectives.

LEADER was created to contribute to the EU's Objective 1: 'to promote the development and structural adjustment of regions whose development is lagging behind' and Objective 5b: 'to promote the development of rural areas'. LEADER, Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale, is a programme created to alleviate the structural problems of rural areas, such as the rural exodus, population ageing, the low profitability of traditional activities, and youth unemployment. However, in the fisheries sector, the application scenario is significantly different. Coastal areas, particularly in

the Mediterranean arc, have not undergone significant depopulation. On the contrary, more than 50% of the population of European countries is concentrated in the coastal strip (Laidin and Berriet-Sollic, 2016). Some factors specific to coastal areas, such as the relative importance of fishing in the territorial economy, population density, and the presence or absence of tertiary activities, differ significantly from those of rural areas. These approaches to territorial dynamics can be translated in different ways in the transfer of the European model of endogenous development.

Although participatory mechanisms for implementing public action in the fisheries sector are relatively recent, the international scientific community has already devoted considerable attention to the issue, particularly through empirical research (Budzych-Tabor, 2014; Gray, 2023; Caamaño-Franco et al., 2020; Felicidades-García and Piñero-Antelo, 2017; Furmankiewicz et al., 2021; Furmankiewicz et al., 2025; Kyvelou and Ierapetritis, 2020; Aubert et al., 2025; Lois-González and Piñero-Antelo, 2020; Markus, 2010; Morgan, 2016; Nicolosi et al., 2021; Piñero-Antelo and Lois-González, 2019; Piñero-Antelo et al., 2020; Romeo and Marcianò, 2019; Stoychev, 2025; Atkočiūnienė et al., 2024; Johansson and Holmquist 2024, Ceccacci, A. et al., 2021; Steiner et al., 2025). Although emerging studies provide valuable results on the successes and failures of transferring the LEADER approach to fishing territories, research that aims to analyse results with a comparative approach on the same territory (fishing areas and rural areas) is rarer.

The text examines the implementation of a LEADER approach to local development in a fishing area. To do this, two Local Action Groups (LAGs) are compared (the Etang de Thau FLAG and its coastal strip of Frontignan and the Pays d'Herault LAG). In particular, the partnership configuration of LAGs and the projects carried out during the 2014-2020 period will be studied. The aim is then to identify the notable differences between the two Local Action Groups (LAGs) and, more broadly, their own interpretation of the principles of the LEADER approach. These different ways of interpreting the LEADER model make it possible to re-examine how the model is transferred (specific to each LAG) and, more generally, to improve its application.

This article is organised into three parts. The first part, entitled Theoretical framework and analysis grid for the study of the LEADER approach in fisheries areas, reviews the state of the art of research on the analysis of the effects of the LEADER programme in European fisheries areas. This will show in particular the weaknesses in the interpretation and implementation of LEADER principles in the coastal scenario and analyse the regulatory elements and management mechanisms defined in the context of the application of the model, in order to identify the conditions and forms of application of the programme in France. Secondly, we will present the methodology and the areas of investigation, as well as the results of the two case studies. Finally, we will discuss the limitations and recommendations of the LEADER model in the light of the results.

2. Theoretical framework and analysis grid for the study of the LEADER approach in fisheries areas

2.1 Adoption of participatory local development in the Common Fisheries Policy

Since the Treaty of Rome in 1957, fishing has been a matter of concern for the Member States of the European Economic Community (EEC), particularly regarding the sharing of resources. However, it was not until 1970 that Europe really began to address the issue. It established a common organisation of the markets in fishery products, setting rules to stabilise it (introduction of a common tariff, identical taxation of imports and creation of marketing standards). More broadly, it granted freedom of access to coastal waters to all Member States of the Community. However, the situation quickly became more complex with the accession of the United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark in 1973. These new Member States, with their strong fishing industries, were difficult for the founding countries to compete with. From then on, in order to protect the social and economic interests of all EEC Member States, the fundamental principle of free access to the coastal waters of another Member State was suspended and exclusive coastal fishing rights zones were established, with Europeans agreeing to leave the management of their fishery resources to the EEC (Debril, 2012).

The European Fisheries Policy (CFP) was created in 1983. With the arrival of new Member States, the EEC introduced a new European regulation (170/83) that "established the concept of 'relative stability of stocks' and 'provided for precautionary management measures' aimed at preserving fish stocks" (Stéfanski, 2013, p. 35). Like the CAP, to which the CFP is closely linked, this regulation establishes fishing quotas for each Member State, calculated on the basis of Total Allowable Catches (TAC). It was not until 1992 that Europe became aware of its fishing overcapacity. Faced with a significant imbalance between catch opportunities (which were declining) and the increase in the fishing fleet, it gradually introduced new licences to reduce the latter. At the same time, the reduction of the Community fleet was accompanied by structural measures to mitigate the social consequences (with financial compensation for fishermen). Despite these measures, the publication in 2001 of a green paper showed their ineffectiveness, as stocks continued to decline inexorably.

This problem has prompted the CFP to incorporate a more sustainable dimension to mitigate the problems facing the fishing industry, steering policy towards social measures to address the depletion of fish stocks and illegal fishing. The difficulty of addressing all these imbalances led the EU to impose a series of reforms in 2002 to make the European fishing sector sustainable across its territorial, social and environmental dimensions. Firstly, it ended public subsidies for boat building and redirected financial support towards social measures to compensate for losses imposed by quotas. It also defined multi-year resource management plans, moving away from traditional annual (TACs) by setting acceptable catch volumes for each species and fishing area. Finally, it created Regional Advisory Councils (RACs) which, by facilitating consultation in the territories (between fishermen, traders, environmental protection organisations and elected representatives), foreshadowed the later application of the LEADER method to the fisheries sector. In this context, the CFP underwent a major reform in 2005, which finally consolidated the strategic importance of fisheries across all EU policies, notably through the creation of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) (European Commission, 2005). However, in 2009, the publication of a new Green Paper³ revealed that the CFP was still somewhat ineffective.

88% of stocks will remain overexploited, while the sector's economic profitability will continue to decline. Even more seriously, the European Commission will raise important structural problems in the implementation of the CFP, such as the lack of genuine fisheries sector strategies in the territories, decision-making mechanisms that encourage a short-term vision, and above all, a lack of political will to enforce regulations and poor compliance with these regulations by the sector (Debril, T., 2012).

Finally, in 2013, to ensure the sustainability of the sector, the reform of the Structural Funds marked a major shift in the orientation of fisheries, transitioning from a productivity-based approach to more environmentally sustainable models. The European Union adapted its funding by establishing the EMFF. Unlike previous programmes, the EMFF allocates a significant portion of its resources to increasing the sustainability and profitability of fisheries. Post-Fordist changes have focused on a return to small-scale fishing and on diversifying fishing areas through tertiary activities (Piñeiro-Antelo et al., 2019; Gray, 2023; Lado, 2024; Steiner et al., 2025). Gradually, the EU's CFP began to implement programmes based on the LEADER method (initially on an experimental basis between 2007 and 2013, then rolling it out more widely from 2013 onwards) in order to maintain the economic and social prosperity of fishing areas, promote employment through diversification of activities and improve the quality of coastal areas.

As with traditional LEADER initiative, these must be based on multifunctionality and the enhancement of endogenous resources. These measures should aim to improve the competitiveness of fishing areas (while preserving resources), restructure and diversify economic activities, add value to fishery products, protect the environment, and support small-scale infrastructure for fishing and tourism (Piñeiro-Antelo et al., 2019).

As in the agricultural context, these policies are developed through multi-annual programmes, but within a 15-year limit. Part of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) (up to a maximum of 15%) can be channelled through local development strategies led by local players (DLAL). The LEADER programme is transferred to coastal territories using the same method of public action within the framework of multi-

³ <https://www.eea.europa.eu/policy-documents/com-2009-163-final-green.2009>

level governance⁴ (Tirado Ballesteros and Chevalier, 2024). LEADER is then applied to coastal territories using the same theoretical approaches to public action and the following principles:

(1) Participatory local development strategies must apply to areas smaller than the NUT3 level, have a certain geographical coherence, low population densities and significant fishing activity (Kyvelou and Ierapetritis, 2020). It is then up to the Member States to establish the criteria for selecting the territories, based on a multitude of criteria specific to each State (European Commission, 2006, p. 21; Felicidades-García and Piñeiro-Antelo, 2017).

(2) The proposed development strategy must be formulated from the bottom up. A participatory approach involving local stakeholders must be applied, from the design of the strategy, the setting of objectives and the implementation and evaluation (Chevalier, 2014).

(3) As in rural areas, Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs) must be officially created, thereby institutionalising the local collective actor. This means that community-led local development (CLLD) is a bottom-up, participatory approach that promotes sustainable development through locally selected projects that meet local needs. CLLD was funded under EMFF 2014–2020 for the second programming period in fisheries and aquaculture areas. Approximately 10% of EMFF budget was allocated to CLLD and managed by 348 fisheries local action groups (FLAGs). Together, these FLAGs funded 14,300 local projects in 19 Member States⁵. (Aubert, 2025).

This method also promotes multi-sectorality (4) and innovation (5), as the strategy must integrate various sectors to foster links among different economic agents. Project eligibility criteria are extremely flexible and are reflected in the national/regional operational programmes. The possibilities for conserving natural and cultural resources through the development of small-scale fishing are criteria that influence the eligibility of projects (FARNET, 2010, Lacquement and Chevalier, 2024).

(6) Cooperation between territories must be encouraged at different territorial levels, through collaborative projects between FLAGs and the transfer of experience and the dissemination of paradigmatic projects in the application of LEADER (7). In addition to the various regional and national networks, the Fisheries Areas Network (FARNET) has been established for this purpose (Chevalier, 2014).

The coherence of local development is ensured through the design of strategy rooted in territorial planning principles, where subsidiarity fosters innovation in local democracy. The application of these approaches enables the implementation of solutions that knowledge of the local population identifies as priorities (Lacquement and Chevalier, 2022). The territorial approach to the policies proposed by the EU thus encourages the construction of territorial capital⁶ thanks to local relationships that result in practices that enhance the value of resources shared by local stakeholders (Camagni, 2013; Kyvelou and Ierapetritis, 2020). More broadly, the LEADER is part of intersectoral, local and participative cooperation, which aims to be more effective and able to meet the needs of local stakeholders (Laidin and Berriet-Sollic, 2016; Atkočiūnienė V. et al., 2024).

⁴ The French current of Territorial Economics has established governance as a principle of territorial management that removes public action from the monopoly of institutions and administration and entrusts it to groups of actors with different origins and skills.

⁵ https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/publications/what-does-clld-bring-coastal-and-fisheries-communities-around-europe_en

⁶ Territorial capital is a concept borrowed from territorial economics. It combines three dimensions of the territorial system that make up the potential for socio-economic development (the territory's tangible and intangible resources, the relational capital developed between the individuals involved in development initiatives, and local governance). This system organises the cooperation and decision-making processes that accompany the design of development strategies and the implementation of territorial projects. In these three dimensions, the territorial system offers competitive advantages that encourage innovation processes by socio-economic players on an individual or collective basis. The theoretical corpus of territorial economics therefore establishes territorial capital as a development factor that underpins the competitiveness of local territories (Camagni, 2006, 2013).

The LEADER approach can be used to address the externalities of the processes of urbanisation, gentrification and touristification in coastal areas through the construction of territorial capital and the development of a sense of local identity. The possibility of creating a sense of belonging to the territory among local players can also strengthen trust between agents and motivation to achieve a common development objective.

Although the implementation of the LEADER method in fishing areas is relatively recent compared to its application in rural areas, its study has aroused the interest of scientists. Since the 2007–2013 period, a series of studies have been carried out analysing the impact of the European programme on territorial development. The literature highlights the positive aspects of the programme's application: for example, the study by Kyvelou and Ierapetritis (2020) in Greece concludes that the survival of small-scale fishing depends on the complementarity of these activities with other tertiary activities, and highlights the decisive role of the FLAGs in creating these synergies. In the case of Spain and Portugal, the projects carried out have been aligned with the objectives defined in the participative local development strategies and have helped improve the competitiveness of the fisheries sector (Felicidades-García and Piñeiro-Antelo, 2017).

The LEADER model has also been transferred to fishing areas with a certain innovative character in projects carried out through certain FLAGs in the Brittany region (Laidin and Berriet-Sollicec, 2016) and Galicia (Piñeiro-Antelo et al., 2019).

Some studies also show more negative aspects. For example, some authors highlight LEADER/FLAGs' limited capacity to boost private investment. The capacity to mobilise private investment was limited on the Atlantic coast of the Iberian Peninsula (Portugal and Spain), with 29% of projects having a private investor as promoter over the period 2007–2013 (Felicidades-García and Piñeiro-Antelo, 2017). In Bretagne, mobilising private capital remains problematic (Laidin and Berriet-Sollicec, 2016). Furthermore, as Ceccaci et al. demonstrated in 2022 in the Mediterranean, the European Fisheries Policy, with a LEADER approach, ultimately led to little diversification and job creation. In their article, it appears that FLAGs located in areas with relatively high employment in the fisheries sector, the scope of territorial projects (intended to generate diversification) has been very limited. Their work concludes that sectoral interests often take precedence over territorial interests.

In addition, the United Kingdom, the implementation of LEADER in fisheries areas has revealed significant misalignments between the interests of aid recipients and the objectives defined in the DLAL. In this case, there is a lack of integration with traditional activities (Morgan, 2016). Difficulties are encountered in implementing multi-sectoral strategies. In Spain, for the 2007–2013 period, more than 50% of projects were oriented towards tourism activities (Miret-Pastor et al., 2018). In addition, local public administrations manage a large proportion of European funds (Felicidades-García and Piñeiro-Antelo, 2017; Piñeiro-Antelo et al., 2019).

Studies analysing the impact of the programme do not focus solely on understanding the economic impact on the area. There is also research in the literature that looks at these impacts from an environmental and social (Freeman and Svets, 2022) point of view. The study by Furmankiewicz et al (2021) analyses the orientation of FLAGs towards projects aimed at mitigating the effects of climate change in Poland. The study showed that there are few projects aimed at adapting to and mitigating climate change. Piñeiro-Antelo and Lois-González (2019) and Thuesen (2010) also highlight the need to promote social inclusion and increase the participation of groups committed to sustainable development. Training programmes also need to be improved, as fishing communities lack knowledge of tertiary activity management (Lois-González and Piñeiro-Antelo, 2020). Nevertheless, research conducted by Freeman and Svets in 2022 shows that, although FLAGs actively support women in their projects, their 'empowerment' in fishing activities remains limited.

2.2 The configuration of the FLAG: a key element in the successful application of the LEADER approach

All dysfunctions in the application of the LEADER programme identified in the literature are, in part, due to the configuration of local stakeholder partnerships. The involvement of local stakeholders in LAG decision-making is linked to the level of empowerment of local stakeholders and their decision-making in the context of seeking co-financing from European funds (Gardano and Del Prete, 2025).

Local interests (mainly exercised by public administrations) often make it difficult to implement certain principles of the LEADER method, such as inter-municipal collaboration. In the new fisheries context in which LEADER is applied, theoretical approaches could yield new forms and outcomes in the application of these local development models. Unlike in rural areas, where farmers do not play a leading role in LAG decision-making, there is greater interest in integrating professionals from the fisheries sector (Laidin and Berriet-Sollic, 2016). EU regulations and national requirements guide the LAG structure, project management and selection, and co-financing processes (Furmankiewicz et al., 2021).

In this way, the EU is attempting to give the CFP a territorial character without neglecting traditional activities, thereby endowing the initiatives with an endogenous character. These directives could lead to promising changes in the configuration of stakeholder networks, and in particular be reflected at the operational level through the orientation of projects and their capacity to encourage territorial innovation. At the operational level, the endogenous nature of these initiatives is reflected in the strong presence of fisheries stakeholders in decision-making. In addition, 50% of FLAG members must represent the fisheries sector.

Member states adopt the transfer potential of the LEADER approach in diverse ways by, closely aligning implementation with their respective national priorities (Chevalier, 2014, Atkočiūnienė et al., 2024). The result is a wide variety of criteria for selecting territories, different procedures and thresholds for project eligibility and different rules for configuring partnerships, which can lead to different ways of developing endogenous resources (Laquement et al., 2020).

The (re)organisation of LAGs proposed by the EU as part of European Fisheries Fund policies may influence collaboration and cooperation processes, which may mean new ways of building territorial capital. The results achieved by the FLAGs depend to a large extent on the Member States' interpretation of the principle of subsidiarity. From these decentralised and locally agreed forms to other more limited forms controlled and imposed by regional and/or national authorities (Piñeiro-Antelo et al., 2020). It is therefore necessary to look at monographic case studies to see how these guidelines are being implemented.

Are we dealing with cross-sector governance or territorial governance? LEADER was born with the aim of developing a territorial policy (rural development) over and above a sectoral policy (agriculture and livestock farming). The transfer of the model to the fisheries sector raises doubts about its ability to transform.

All these considerations are also reflected in the projects carried out by the FLAGs, and the correct application of some of the principles of the LEADER methodology, such as the territorial approach, the bottom-up integration and multi-sectorality, networking, innovation and cooperation, can be assessed through a critical reading of the projects carried out and the participative local development strategy.

2.3 The French context: the DLAL

For the 2007–2013 period⁷, unlike the distribution of responsibilities in rural development programmes, where the transfer is characterised by a partially decentralised management model, since programme management is the responsibility of regional governments (Chevalier, 2012), the management of EMFF DLAL programmes is based on a notoriously centralised model. The Directorate for Maritime Fisheries and

⁷ The LEADER transfer model in France changed in 2015 with Law.n°2015-991 of 7 August 2015 on the new territorial organisation of the Republic. From the 2014-2020 period, the Regions will be responsible for drawing up regional operational programmes.

Aquaculture (DPMA) is responsible for verifying project eligibility. These functions are shared with the Agence de services et de paiement (ASP)⁸. The FLAGS selection processes were organised in a single stage, with the creation of the groups having to be adjusted to the limited coastal areas defined at the national level. The call consisted of three main sections which included the following group selection criteria: (1) a description of the area and its problems, together with a SWOT analysis; (2) the partnership and strategy, broken down into an action plan and its measures; and (3) the budget.

In other Member States, the territorial configuration of the groups has led to overlaps in the delimitation of territory allocated to the LAGP relative to the rural FLAGS. In fact, in some cases, the same association is responsible for channelling resources and designing the EMFF and EAFRD strategy (Felicidades-García and Piñeiro-Antelo, 2017). The territorialisation of EMFF aid also generates certain uncertainties about the initial approaches and the way in which they can be interpreted. European regulatory requirements, for example, led the French government to select territories that were both geographically coherent and had a significant presence of the fisheries sector in the socio-economic fabric (European Commission, 2006). France has a valid system that encourages the territorialisation of local development, the "pays", to which the territorialisation of rural development programmes has been largely adapted, but which, in some cases, is out of step with the delimitation of local development strategies within the framework of the EMFF⁹.

The interpretation of subsidiarity in this case is conditional on a still marginal experimental pilot programme with a modest economic dimension (Tab. 1). For the 2007–2013 period, out of the 17 proposals, 11 FLAGS have been set up in France (4 groups on the Mediterranean coast and 7 on the Atlantic coast), managing an average budget of approximately €1.02 million for each group. Following the lessons learned from the application of LEADER in rural development programmes, and in order to limit the appearance of localism, limit the power of local public administrations and achieve the greatest possible representation of social players, each FLAG partnership must be made up of at least 50% private players. In addition, 50% of the members of the FLAGS must be representatives of the fisheries sector (FARNET, 2010). LEADER started out as a pilot programme in the coastal countryside (Laidin and Berriet-Sollicec, 2016), and this has resulted in centralisation at national level of the channelling of European aid and a top-down process in the operation of project approval as follows: potential beneficiaries submit projects to the FLAGS, the group selection Committee examines and selects the projects, the Regional Maritime Affairs Directorate gives its opinion on the projects selected. The ASP then checks the eligibility of the selected projects on behalf of the DPMA. The ASP makes the payment directly to the beneficiary of the approved project.

This scenario has been significantly modified for the 2014–2020 period with the transfer of programme management to the regions. Thus, programmes based on the LEADER approach in coastal areas are assimilated into the decentralized models applied in rural development policies, with regional councils issuing calls for projects and approving the projects proposed by the FLAGS. Between 2014–2020, the participative local development strategies of the LAGAPs are not exclusive, and territories can merge strategies with LAGs financed by the EAFRD. The EU is placing greater emphasis on programmes with a LEADER approach, and this local development methodology is beginning to be applied in regional policies ERDF and in social policies (through the ESF). In this way, a single association can channel and centralise projects from different European funds and integrate them into a single strategy. In the case of France, calls for the creation of local action groups financed by the various European structural and investment funds have been organised separately. In practice, there are several FLAGS managed by an organisation (usually a country) which also manages a rural development LAG. The importance of participative local development policies within the EMFF framework has been consolidated, resulting in larger budget allocations and a greater number of FLAGS, up from 11 to 23 (Tab. 1).

⁸ The Agence de services et de paiement (ASP) is a cross-cutting body that assists certain ministries in setting up mechanisms for processing, controlling and paying public aid.

⁹ Law n° 2010–1563 of 16 December 2010 on the reform of local and regional authorities limited the delimitation of new countries.

Tab 1. Budget for participatory local development in France through the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFF). Source: FARNET, 2010, 2017

	EMFF	
	2007–2013	2014–2020
Total EU contribution to programmes (€ million)	5 699 644	20 430 353
Amount earmarked for Axis 4 (EMFF % of total Structural Funds)	2.64 %	4%
National contribution (€ million)	5 535 936	20 430 353
Total budget (€ million)	11 235 580	40 860 706
Number of FLAGs in France	11	23
Average budget per group (€ million)	1.02	1.77
Population of selected territories	2 030 771	4 348 849
Average population density (inhab/km ²)	87.8	164.3

3. Methodology

3.1 A methodology based on a comparative approach

The study compares the results obtained in the application of the programme in a LAG configured in a rural area and a FLAG configured in a coastal area in the same territory in the Hérault department: the FLAG Etang de Thau and its coastal border and the LAG Pays Cœur d'Hérault. The empirical analysis is developed within the framework of a comparative approach at the operational level and with an ex-post character.

The analysis focuses on the results through a detailed analysis of the projects financed by the European program. To compare the two realities, we are interested in the orientation and the way the projects are carried out. For the study of the projects, we have analyzed project files and ex post reports for the 2014–2020 period. The data analysis is based on the methodology used in the scientific studies by Lacquement and Chevalier (2019) and Lacquement and Chevalier (2020). The processing of the information is based on a quantitative analysis of the projects carried out, which have been classified, categorised and quantified, taking into account the following elements linked to the LEADER approach: the project leader, the location of the project, the economic allocation to the different actions, the territorial resources mobilised, the economic sectors involved in the projects and the processes of inter-communal collaboration, which will enable the definition and taxonomic characterisation of the clusters. To do this, multivariate statistical analysis techniques and cartographic production of the territorial distribution of these variables are used.

For each class in the typologies produced, the continuous type indicators can be sorted in order of their importance in the characterisation, by calculating the distance between their average in the class and their overall average, taking into account their variance within the class. For an indicator X and a class k, the quantity $T_k(X)$, known as the "test value", is used to evaluate this distance in terms of the number of standard deviations of a normal distribution:

$$T_k(X) = \frac{\bar{X}_k - \bar{X}}{s_k(X)}$$

- with:
- $\bar{X}$ = overall mean of X,
 - $s^2(X)$ = empirical variance of X,
 - n = total number of individuals,
 - n_k = number in class k,
 - $\bar{X}_k$ = mean of X in class k
 - $s_k^2(X)$ = variance of X in class k = $\frac{n-n_k}{n-1} \frac{s^2(X)}{n_k}$

The test value measures the similarity between indicator and class. The higher the test value, the more characteristic the indicator is of the class. The commonly accepted threshold is 2.

In total, 80 funded projects were studied (43 projects labelled by the Pays Cœur d'Hérault LAG and 37 projects by the Etang de Thau LAGPA and its coastal strip from Frontignan to Agde).

3.2 Survey areas. The case of the FLAG Etang de Thau and its coastal strip from Frontignan to Agde and the LAG Pays Cœur d'Hérault

Situated to the south-west of Montpellier, the Thau basin has a high landscape and environmental value linked to a series of marine lagoons. The area's economy is strongly linked to the various uses of the lagoon and its proximity to Montpellier. The lagoon's environmental conditions (absence of tides and high nutrient levels) favour the rapid growth of molluscs, and 90% of the oyster and mussel production in the French Mediterranean is grown in the Etang de Thau, where direct distribution channels (40% retail sales) are well established. Nevertheless, this fishing sector has deteriorated over the last 20 years, particularly in trawling, where production has fallen by 50% in anchovy and sardine catches, due to rising production costs and resource depletion (Steiner, 2025). Agriculture also plays a relatively important socio-economic role in the region, particularly in the wine sector (76% of the agricultural area). This too is in decline, with the area losing more than 30% of its agricultural surface area in 12 years (Pary, 2014), in parallel with strong residential pressure, particularly in the municipalities of Gigean and Fabrègues, which are subject to both proximity to Montpellier and their attractiveness to tourists (Rio and Troyer, 2010). The latter are very present (particularly around Sète and Agde, which account for 81% of the area's accommodation capacity) and are essentially linked to nautical, spa and residential tourism (Pary, 2014).

The FLAG comprises 17 municipalities (9 from the Communauté d'agglomération du Bassin de Thau, 5 from the « Communauté de communes » du Nord du Bassin de Thau, and 3 from the Communauté d'Agglomération Hérault Méditerranée). Its territorial boundaries have changed slightly over the last few years. Four new municipalities (Mireval, Montagnac, Montbazin and Vic-la-Gardiole) have joined the partnership.

During the 2007–2013 period, "Thau et son Lido" was set up as an ad hoc association, established through a partnership between fishermen and shellfish farmers, to channel LEADER funds. For the 2014–2020 period, the FLAG "Etang de Thau et sa bande côtière de Frontignan à Agde" is managed by the Syndicat Mixte du Bassin de Thau, which was originally set up to preserve the lagoon and coordinate all the public policies for ecological transition and innovation in the fisheries sector.

To confirm our hypothesis that the greater presence of stakeholder groups in traditional fisheries sectors influences the ways in which the LEADER model is implemented, we also analysed a (rural) LAG with extensive experience in managing LEADER funds, the Cœur-d'Hérault LAG. The latter has certain similarities with the Etang de Thau LAGP, in particular its proximity to urban areas and its unbalanced socio-economic fabric, marked by the omnipresence of tertiary activities. The Pays Cœur d'Hérault LAG area lies to the south of the Massif Central, and its geographical position close to Montpellier and Béziers gives it good road access (A75/A750) (Chevalier et al., 2018).

The territory has experienced demographic growth driven by the expansion of Montpellier's catchment area. The population has increased by 25% over the last 20 years, even though the unemployment rate is well above the national average (14.6% in the Clermont-Lodève Pôle-emploi agency, compared with 11.3% nationally). Nevertheless, its population density remains relatively low at 61 inhabitants/km² (compared with over 320 for the FLAG). The LAG has a population of 85,000, spread across 77 municipalities and three « communautés de communes » (Communauté de Communes de la Vallée de l'Hérault, Communauté de Communes du Lodévois et Larzac and Communauté de Communes du Clermontois) (Pays Cœur d'Hérault, 2021).

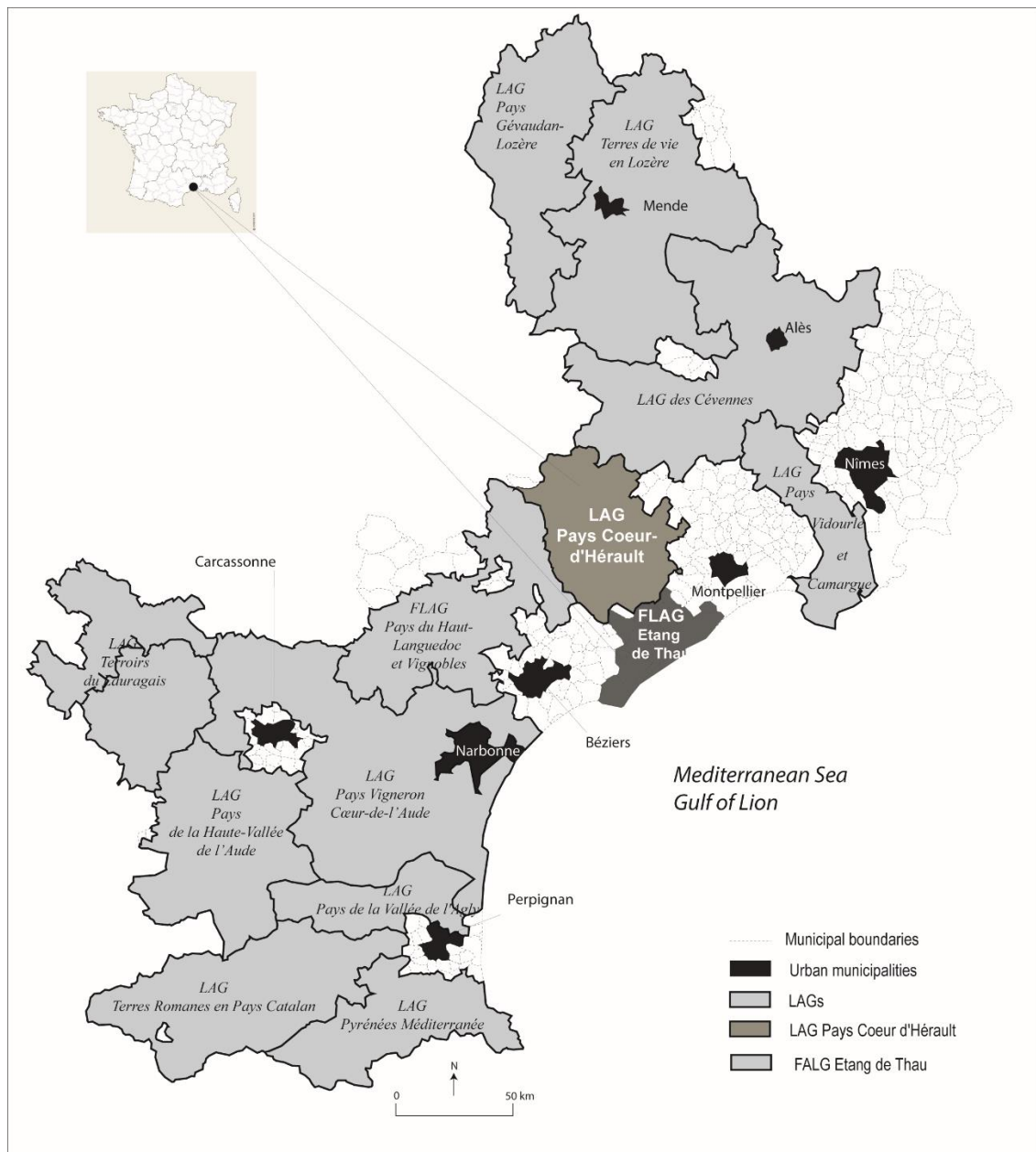


Fig 1. Location of the case study. Source: FLAG Étang de Thau, 2014; Pays Cœur d'Hérault, 2020

Despite this, agriculture still plays a significant role, mainly in the wine-growing sector (which employs 10% of the working population). The Pays Cœur d'Hérault has 20% of the agricultural land in the Hérault department. However, the farming population is ageing, with 60% of farmers aged 60 or older (Pays Cœur d'Hérault, 2021). The region boasts a rich cultural heritage, with three UNESCO World Heritage Sites (31% of tourists visiting the Hérault department visit the Grands Sites). The region benefits from its proximity to the coast in the 4th French tourist department and the 1st tourist department in the Occitanie region with 37.4 million overnight stays (Observatoire d'Hérault Tourisme, 2017).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Composition of the steering committee

One of the priorities set out in the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund DLAL is precisely to put in place a governance model that adapts to local issues. The EU's requirements concerning the positioning of fishing collectives within the FLAG steering committee are thus materialised in the case study. The FLAG Etang de Thau and its coastal strip from Frontignan to Agde is made up of a joint

committee of 20 players (8 representing the public sector (40%) and 12 (60%) the private sector), whose mission is to select projects, monitor compliance with the DLAL strategy and evaluate the program. 7 Committee members include representatives of 5 fishing institutions: the Comité Régional des Pêches Maritimes et d'élevage marin Occitanie (CRPMEM), the Producers' Organisation (PO) Société Coopérative Maritime des pêcheurs de Sète Môle (SATHOAN), the OP du Sud, another Mediterranean fishermen's producers' organisation, the Prud'hommes pêcheurs du littoral and the Criée d'Agde; 5 other players representing aquaculture institutions: Comité Régional de Conchyliculture de Méditerranée (CRCM), OP des conchyliculteurs de Thau, Coopérative des 5 ports, Syndicat conchylicole and Authorised Trade Union Association des cultures en mer. In addition to representatives of sea-based production activities, the committee includes representatives of the intercommunal bodies, the tourist offices, the Chamber of Agriculture, the EPR Port Sud de France, and the Lycée de la mer.

The composition of the Pays Cœur d'Hérault LAG steering committee, on the other hand, shows a different balance. These differences can be seen in the participation of local authorities (representatives of Municipalities) and in the presence of representatives of traditional activities (fishermen versus farmers). The LAG Pays Cœur d'Hérault is made up of a joint committee of 28 players (12 public players and 16 private players), as follows: 12 elected representatives from each member Community of Municipalities, the President of the Pays Cœur d'Hérault Development Council, 1 representative from each Consular Chamber (3); 2 representatives of social players, 2 representatives of environmental players, 3 representatives of cultural networks and players, 2 representatives of associations working in urban planning, architecture and landscape, 2 representatives of youth associations and 1 representative of associations supporting farmers.

Tab 2. Composition of the steering committee. Source: FLAG Étang de Thau, 2014 ; LAG Pays Cœur d'Hérault, 2015

	FLAG Étang de Thau	LAG Pays Cœur d'Hérault
Public authorities	40% (8 members)	43% (12 members)
Private sector of which:	60% (12 members)	57% (16 members)
• Fishing industry representatives	7 members	0 members
• Representatives from the agricultural sector	1 member	3 members
• Representatives of social players	0 member	2 members
• Representatives of environmental stakeholders	1 member	2 members
• Representatives of cultural networks and players	1 member	3 members
• Representatives of economic players	1 member	4 members
• Other	1 member	2 members

4.2 Different forms of support for public action in different areas

These differences in the composition of the steering committee appear to have a substantial impact on how public action is supported (fig. 2), as the types of projects are broadly similar across the two LAGs. In the Pays Cœur d'Hérault LAG, support is essentially municipal. This dominates the mid-mountain areas (Larzac), which M. Talandier described as old and weak regions. The review shows that the majority of project sponsors are municipalities or inter-communal bodies (70% on average per LAG), while the nature of the projects attests to the priority given to public infrastructure. They mainly concern the construction of structuring facilities (public service centres, local museums), the restoration of facades or the development of public spaces. The LEADER programme sometimes seems to be a pretext for funding operations that do not fall directly within its scope. In this case, local political leadership has seized on the LEADER approach to turn it into an instrument for structural catching up, without seeking to identify and activate local resources. This logic of catching up is far removed from the objectives of the LEADER programme and from the logic which the current institutional economics describes as a logic of specifying socio-economic resources (Lacquement and Chevalier, 2016).

In the case of the Etang de Thau, although the projects promoted by institutional players show percentages similar to those of the Pays Coeur-d'Hérault LAG, there are differences in how they are promoted. While the municipalities' infrastructure projects are marginal, most are geared towards enhancing and promoting fisheries resources with a supra-municipal character, mainly through the institutions of Agde. In contrast to the Pays Coeur-d'Hérault LAG, the LEADER programme is not being used as a tool, or at least not as a means of financing operations that do not fall directly within its scope. On the coastal side, municipalities are taking greater responsibility for the strategy and development of endogenous resources.

The second form of coordination identified for public action relates to associations. In the Pays Coeur-d'Hérault LAG, this concerns the municipality in the Haute Vallée de l'Hérault tourist region. These rural regions are characterised, among other things, by their strong residential appeal and by the vitality of the associative phenomenon. Many local associations have fully understood the benefits of the LEADER programme and have taken advantage of it to apply for support for projects based on the development of heritage, cultural or sporting resources. These associations have strong local roots. They have forged many partnerships with various local development structures, such as Pays and regional nature parks. In coastal areas, the presence of projects promoted by associations is mainly linked to the Comité Régional de la Conchyliculture de Méditerranée. There is therefore no territorial specialisation, but rather a strong involvement of a single type of stakeholder. Once again, the sectoral focus is clearly on aquaculture, with several projects approved for economic feasibility studies and strategic planning of the potential of these resources. The associative fabric thus displays a clear supra-municipal, and even regional, orientation, even if the degree of diversification is limited. The presence of other associative groups in the social sphere and in other productive sectors is more limited in the implementation of projects.

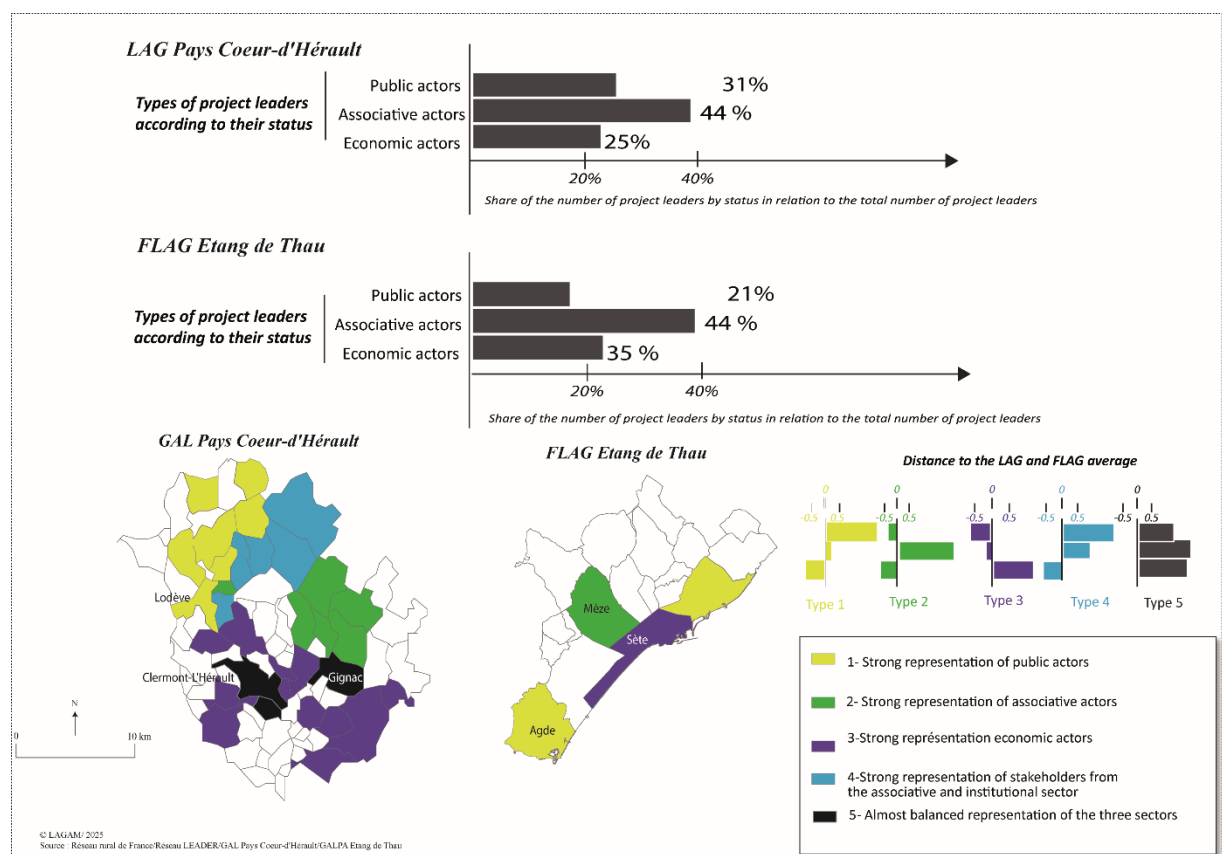


Fig 2. Project leaders. Source: LAG Pays Cœur d'Hérault and FLAG Etang de Thau

The third form of coordination of local action is characterised by a purely entrepreneurial approach. This concerns just 12% of the municipalities in the Pays Coeur-d'Hérault LAG, but in regions marked by the legacy of the crisis in industrial activity (the Lodévois industrial basin) and the drastic contraction of

the local job market in the absence of opportunities for retraining. In most cases, the entrepreneurs who have applied for support from the LEADER programme are active members of the LAGs and have been involved in drafting the strategy. The majority are heads of small businesses (90% have fewer than 10 employees). Three-quarters of them belong to the tourism and services sector, and one-quarter to the craft industry. Voluntarily oriented towards diversifying the rural economy, the projects focus on developing the region's social resources (know-how, local traditions) and on tourism investments (restoration of the built heritage and creation of guest rooms). Projects run by small businesses are rare in the Etang de Thau. In any case, there are several initiatives by producers' organizations in the shellfish-farming and fishing sectors, but they have limited capacity to generate direct employment. Most of the projects promoted by these organizations have a production orientation and focus on promoting and disseminating territorial product brands and fishery and aquaculture products. These types of projects are mainly located in Sète, given the strategic importance of its fishing port and the dynamic community spirit of the fishing sector in the southern Gulf of Lion. Nevertheless, and even though this reflects the FLAG's strategy? 60% of the projects in this municipality are led by FLAG members, and the composition of its programming committee influences the projects funded.

4.3 Differentiated processes for activating resources

The process of selecting resources helps to differentiate local development action. (F)LAGs strategies interpret the national-level guidelines by selecting categories (Fig. 3a and 3b). These choices are the local translation of the rural and fisheries policy and express the endogenous nature of the territorial development approach. The local interpretation of the LEADER program depends heavily on the nature of the chosen socio-economic resources and on how they are used to boost the local economy. It is the development projects that activate the territorial resources identified in the strategic documents.

Statistical processing of the LEADER project files reveals, first of all, a common point. Both LAGs are committed to integrating territorial resources. The design of the projects integrates all the categories in a global approach to activating the local territory's territorial resources. The LAGs' strategy aims to capture income from urban and/or tourist customers by highlighting local products and promoting natural and cultural heritage. This overall approach differs from the simple association or sectorisation of local resources. Rather, it reflects an advanced apprenticeship in the LEADER approach.

This integration approach is largely dominated by the relatively high proportion of cultural resources in the projects. The creation of added value through the enhancement of cultural heritage is based on projects that focus on the organization of production sectors and tourist services. This approach is very much in evidence in the Pays Cœur d'Hérault LAG, where it is combined with the development of natural heritage and environmental resources, thanks to the regional nature parks. However, the logic of integrating territorial resources differs according to the geographical distribution of projects within the LAGs. The logic of association and integration, specifically dedicated to the organization of heritage enhancement activities, is widely distributed within the Pays Cœur d'Hérault LAG area. This is particularly the case in the municipalities of the upper Hérault valley and the Larzac plateau, where population density is declining, and economic difficulties are increasing. On the other hand, these communities have benefited from improved accessibility since the construction of the A75 motorway, a meridian route that reaches the Montpellier conurbation and the Languedoc coast after crossing the Massif Central.

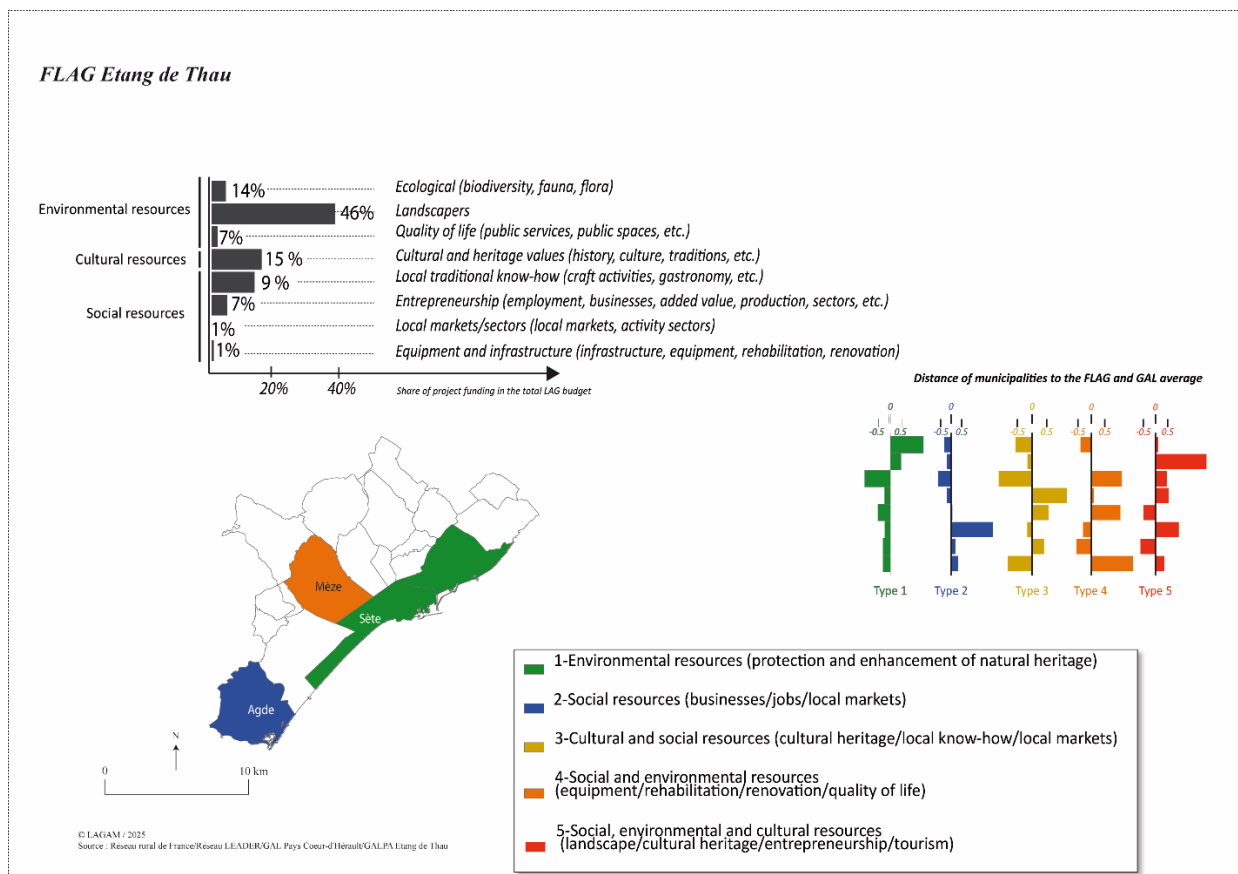


Fig 3a. Activating resources in the FLAG Etang de Thau. Activating resources in the LAG Pays Cœur-d'Hérault. Source: FLAG Etang de Thau

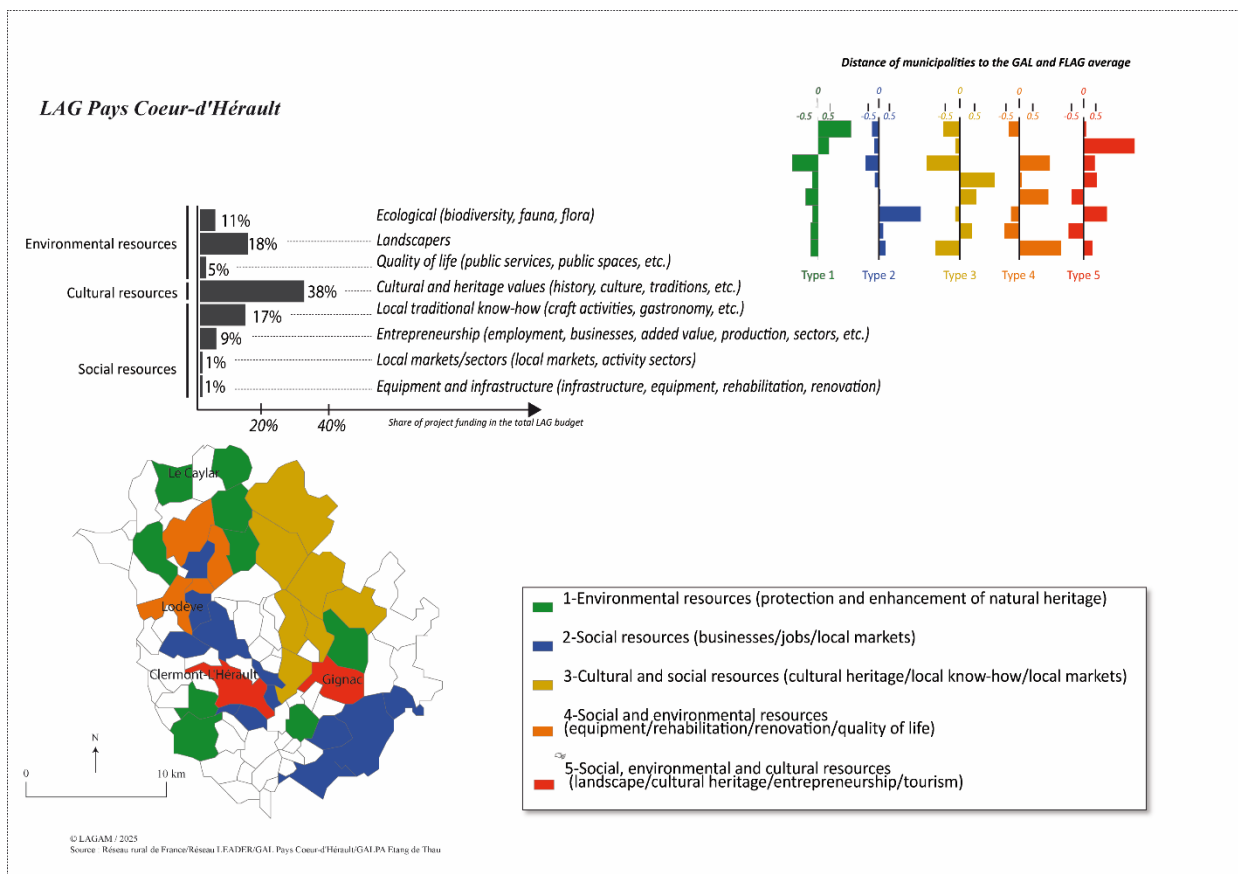


Fig 3b. Activating resources in the LAG Pays Cœur-d'Hérault. Source: LAG Pays Cœur-d'Hérault

The communities in the hinterland, in the upper Hérault valley and in the mid-range mountains as far as the coast, are characterised by the association and integration of resources. These municipalities benefit from the development of a piedmont road. The role of the town centres (Clermont-l'Hérault and Gignac) seems to be a discriminating factor in the polarisation of projects and the integration of resources. On the other hand, the municipalities closest to the Montpellier conurbation have a more sector-based approach to exploiting local resources. The urban influence shapes the forms of action in favour of craft and commercial businesses (the development of business parks, marketing operations, etc.). In the case of the Étang de Thau FLAG, the activation of resources clearly prioritizes the enhancement of natural and cultural heritage, particularly in the coastal municipalities. The influence of tourism has not been decisive in the Etang de Thau environment, as interventions on natural resources have once again had a positive impact on the sustainability of the lagoon's aquatic resources. Similarly, cultural resources have also been developed, in this case with a didactic function, but not with a productive vision. Although there are several projects to recover the lagoon's trophic capacity, the urban influence in this case also serves to (re)enhance the heritage value of the resources.

4.4 Initiatives to develop economic resources

Resource development initiatives depend on the project promoters. By focusing on the latter, the analysis aims to characterize the endogenous development initiative, which, depending on the three spheres of actors represented within the LAGs, may be more or less institutional, more or less associative or more or less entrepreneurial. The status of project leaders is a decisive factor in differentiating the forms of coordination of local action. We can distinguish between exclusive or quasi-exclusive forms of project management and associated forms. The former are characterized by the over-representation of one of the three spheres, while the latter present initiatives more evenly distributed across the different types of local players. If we cross-reference the types of players involved with the resources activated, we can characterise and map the forms of coordination of local development action (Fig. 4a and 4b).

In the Pays Cœur d'Hérault, there is a clear gradient in the geography of local action. In the northern municipalities, which are the least populated and oldest municipalities in the LEADER region, it is mainly the municipalities (type 1) that lead actions devoted to the creation of infrastructures and public facilities (centers for services to the population, but also renovation of public buildings and development of public spaces). This exclusive approach may be supported by associations (type 4), as in the remote and, above all, isolated piedmont communities in the north-east of the LEADER region, where municipal initiatives are supported by associations which have taken on local development tasks. There are very close personal links between the municipalities and the associations, which work together to combine improvements to rural facilities with the diversification of local activities. The involvement of associations can be more exclusive and take the lead, as in the Haute Vallée de l'Hérault (type 2): affiliated for the most part to national federations, the associations are very active in promoting heritage resources and attracting tourist traffic to prestigious, highly attractive sites. The influence of the Montpellier conurbation seems to be increasing business initiatives in the southernmost municipalities. In these repopulated and rejuvenated municipalities, the proximity of the urban area is directing LEADER projects towards personal services on the one hand, and recreational and leisure activities (equestrian centres) on the other (type 3). Finally, the town centres and their outlying municipalities, where numerous business parks have been developed, are the focus of numerous initiatives from all three spheres of local society, mobilising a wide variety of resources (type 5): heritage restoration, modernisation of productive economic sectors, diversification through tourism, and promotion of local cultures. In the case of the FLAG Etang de Thau, it is difficult to address the local action's geographical dynamics. This is due to the fact that more than 60% of the projects were carried out by players based in Sète, and to a lesser extent in Mèze (15%) and Agde (15%). In any case, paradoxically, in terms of these variables, the behaviour of the coastal area is similar to that of the northern municipalities of the Pays Cœur de l'Hérault. This form of resource development (type 1) is evident in Sète and Frontignan, where public support predominates in favour of equipment projects.

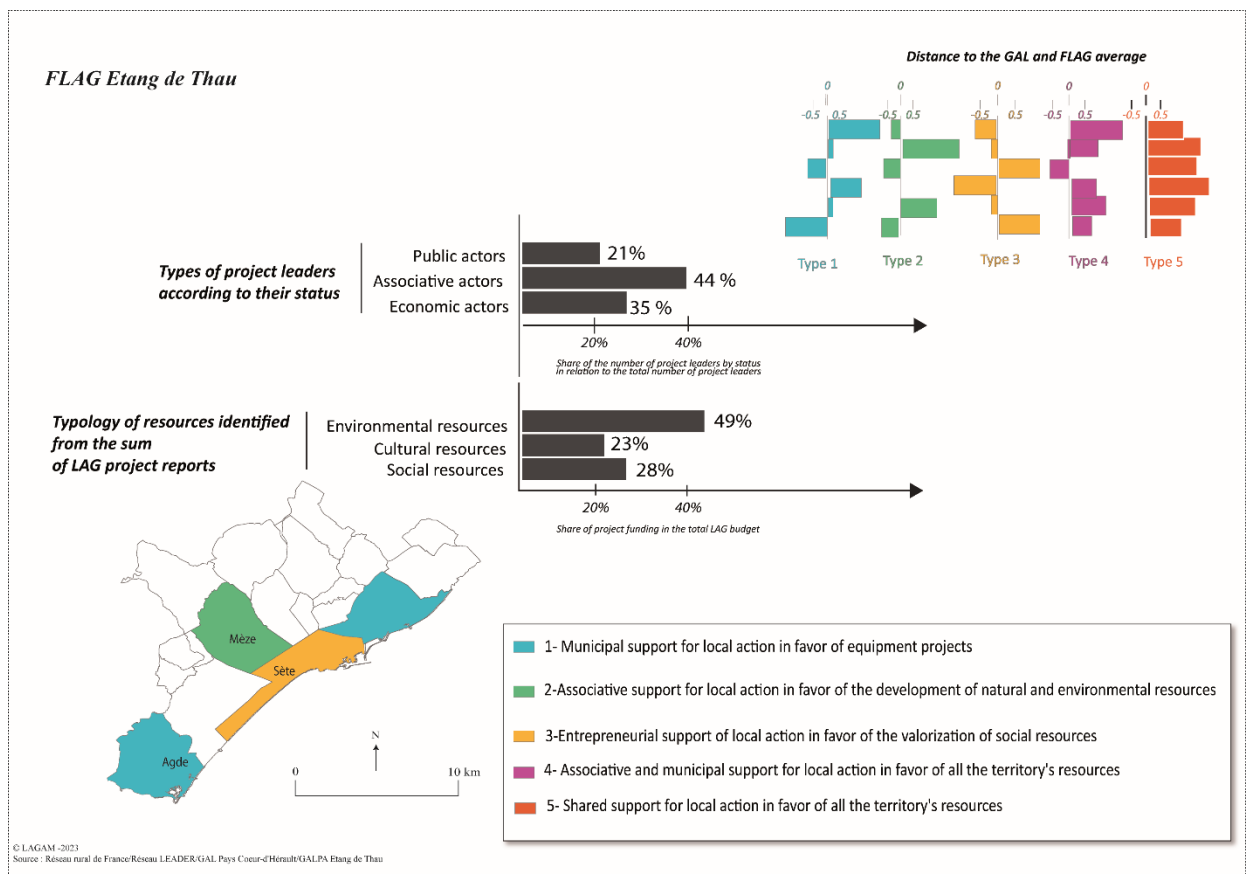


Fig 4a. Making the most of resources in the FLAG Etang de Thau. Source: FLAG Etang de Thau and its coastal strip from Frontignan to Agde

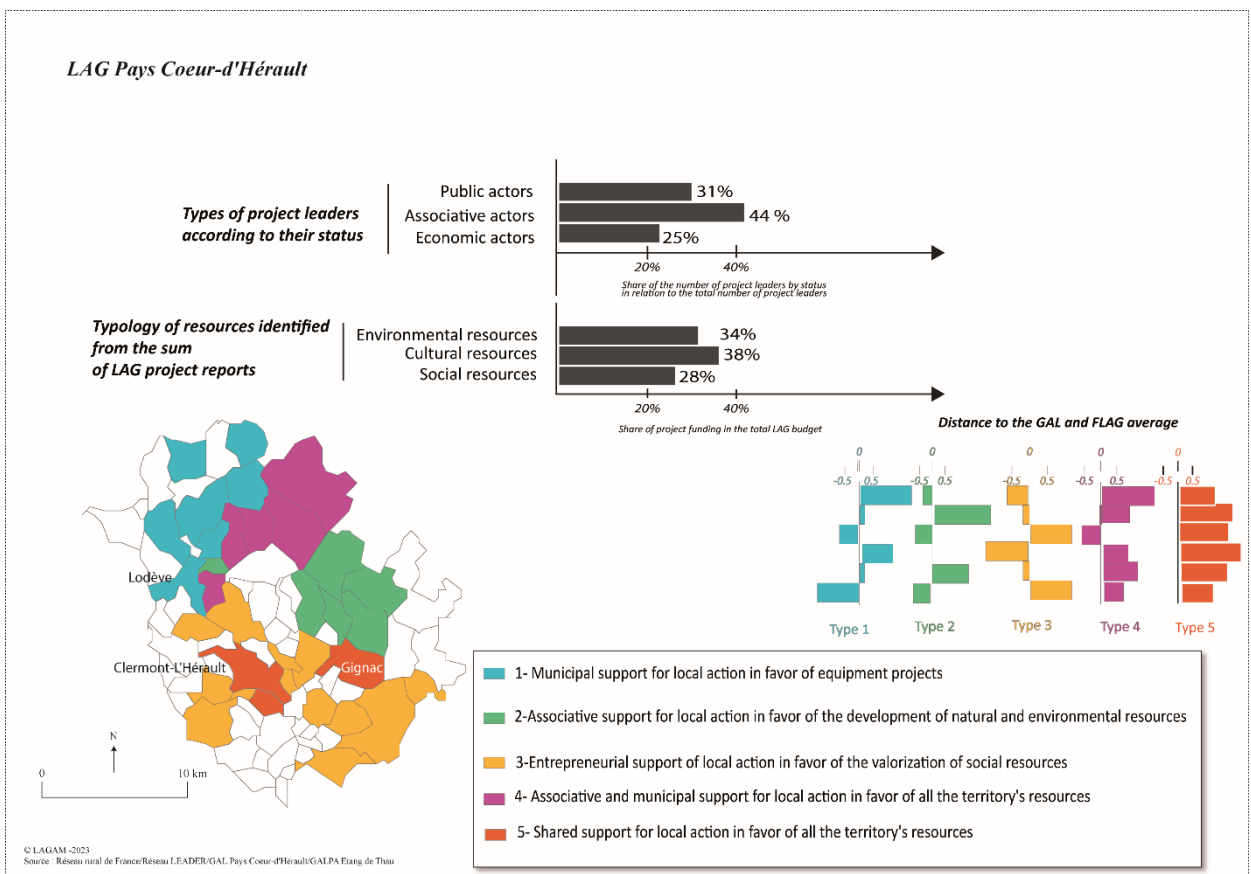


Fig 4b. Making the most of resources in the LAG Pays-Cœur-d'Hérault. Source: LAG Pays Cœur-d'Hérault

4.5 Different types of local initiatives to promote employment

The Fig. 5, based on a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) shows the different types of initiatives that sustain local employment resources mobilised and the types of project beneficiaries.

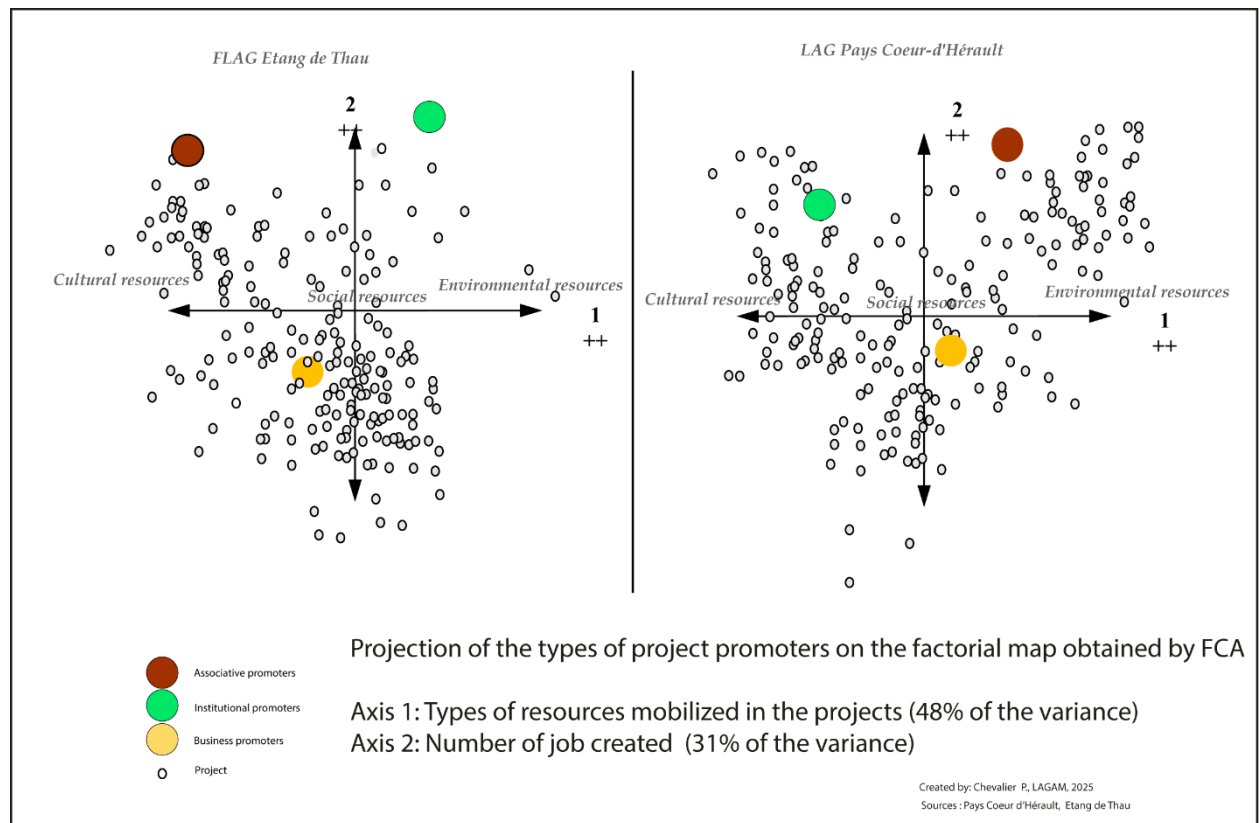


Fig 5. Employment trends, territorial resources and project promoters. Source: LAG Pays-Cœur-d'Hérault and FLAG Etang de Thau

It provides information on how territorial resources are mobilized within projects. Projects supported by the LAG Cœur d'Hérault and the FLAG Etang de Thau generally activate different types of resources. More specifically, the projects supported by the LAG Pays Cœur d'Hérault tend to activate the territory's environmental and cultural resources in a much more integrated way than FLAG projects, which focus mainly on economic and social resources. The Fig. 5 also shows that job creation varies according to the resources mobilized in each territory. In the FLAG, new jobs were created primarily through the promotion of cultural resources (particularly in connection with tourism that has developed around fishing in the lagoons). In the rural LAG, environmental resources contributed to job creation. Finally, the graph provides information on the role of the various project leaders in job creation. In both territories, associations were the main promoters of job-creating projects. In the Cœur-d'Hérault LAG, the initiatives proposed by associations are rooted in a dense entrepreneurial fabric that has helped strengthen the employment situation. In contrast, in the FLAG, local authorities and institutions have compensated for the relative weakness of entrepreneurial initiative (still very much focused on sectoral projects and not very territorial) by promoting projects and developing resources that encourage job creation.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The article presents results on the application of the LEADER approach during the 2014–2020 period, in a comparative framework between fisheries and rural territories, in a context of relational and geographical proximity. The methodology proposed, using atN clustering technique, made it possible to classify project leaders at the local level, the different ways of activating resources.

negative relationship between the configuration of the steering committee and the results in terms of project orientation and public policy implementation work confirms several points. First, it shows a strong implementation. Where the network is dominated by the voluntary sector, as is the case in the Pays Cœur d'Hérault LAG (marked by a significant process of peri-urbanization), projects mainly mobilize environmental resources and are more “cross-cutting” or even territorial than sectoral (chiefly aiming to improve the residents’ quality of life. Conversely, as shown by Ceccaci et al. in 2022, in which entrepreneurial actors dominate the LAG steering committee (as is the case in the FLAG Etang de Thau), projects with a territorial dimension (mobilizing several resources) are rarer and remain very much focused on promoting the economic resources linked to fishing. In this region, where employment in the fishing industry and its economic importance remain high (more than 22% of total employment and 33% of gross domestic product), only about 20 projects (out of 127) have a real territorial impact and aim to promote diversification. It is clear here that the sectoral interests of the fishing industry have taken precedence over territorial interests. Indirectly, European fisheries policy, with its LEADER approach, has ultimately generated little diversification and job creation.

On the other hand, there were problems with how LEADER was used by LAG members, with local lobbying happening in both areas (although it was a bit more noticeable in the FLAG). The completed projects were definitely in line with the goals set out in each strategy, but the endogenous nature of the development was largely lost in the process. In the Étang de Thau FLAG, two-thirds of the projects (62% of the investment) were led by members of the steering committee or members of the fishermen's union, which dominates the region, compared with half (54% of the investment) in Pays Cœur d'Hérault. The idea that local learning, promoted by the LEADER approach, should break down barriers between public action and avoid lobbying (whether economic or political) still seems to have little practical impact.

Consequently, and more specifically in the context of the fisheries sector, this lobbying by an economic sector whose sectoral interests take precedence over territorial diversification is a key cause of the ineffectiveness of the environmental dimension of European fisheries policy. These biases are further reinforced by sometimes simplistic discourse on environmental issues (which are opposed to economic and territorial issues), which constitutes yet another ‘obstacle’ to the EU's green and blue transition (Steiner et al. in 2025). Furthermore, although the strategies combine bottom-up and top-down approaches, the bureaucratic nature of the LEADER approach, widely documented in the literature (Atkočiūnienė, 2024), is no exception to the administrative burden of implementing projects in the FLAG (Tirrado-Ballesteros et al., 2024).

However, even though the data from this research show the difficulty of establishing territorial governance within the framework of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (as is often the case with the EAFRD), some projects designed according to the LEADER approach and implemented in the FLAG and LAG have stimulated cooperation between territories at different levels (from municipalities to regions) and a higher degree of innovation in projects (Lacquement et al. 2024), particularly social innovation (with the creation of cooperative and participatory organizations¹⁰). These projects, which are mainly territorial and focused on the wine or fishing agritourism sector, are tentatively beginning to strengthen links between the main economic, social, cultural and environmental actors and sectors (Atkočiūnienė et al, 2024). Although they contribute to the feminization of the activity (three-quarters of cooperative and participatory societies are run by women), the jobs created often remain precarious (Freeman et al., 2022) because they are tied to tourism's seasonality.

Unlike other areas in Southern Europe (particularly on Spain's Costa Brava and France's Côte d'Azur), the degree of tourism specialisation remains very low (Miret-Pastor et al., 2018). It appears that the production activity, which is now dynamic (thanks to the introduction of the ‘Huitres de l'Etang de Thau’ label), has made it possible to avoid the ‘excessive’ tourist focus of projects which, elsewhere, have largely deviated from European guidelines, mainly focused on the productive function of endogenous development, the capacity to generate jobs, the creation of income complementary to traditional

¹⁰ A cooperative and participatory company or cooperative production company is, under French law, a commercial company that differs from traditional companies in that the majority of its capital and decision-making power is held by its employees and its operating rules are based on cooperative principles.

activities, and the attractiveness of new private investment. (Felicidades-García and Piñeiro-Antelo, 2017; Aubert, 2025; Loizou et al., 2014). This situation raises questions. Two factors seem to be at play. Firstly, the fishing industry is more economically resilient in the Etang de Thau FLAG than elsewhere. Its economic focus, shaped by its label's image, makes it less sensitive to the vagaries of international markets and global competition. Furthermore, the territory's proximity to major tourist resorts on the Languedoc coast (from the town of Sète to the Spanish border and beyond) leaves little room for tourism projects, which remain uncompetitive in a highly competitive regional environment.

Certain limitations to this study must also be acknowledged. The fact that the application of the LEADER approach is subordinate to the definition of the local strategy prevents the results from being extrapolated to a general level, and they are closely linked to the case study, even though some of the results are also included in previous literature. On the other hand, the fact that the Étang de Thau LAG concentrated the implementation of projects on just three municipalities (Adge, Sète and Mèze) makes it difficult to read the territorial context, as did the distribution of funding across the Cœur de l'Hérault LAG. The different socio-economic contexts of the municipalities that make up the LAG Cœur de l'Hérault have clearly conditioned the creation of localized clusters through geographical proximity in the creation of territorial capital. These forms of territorial capital creation have materialized in public action carriers and various forms of resource activation. However, these conclusions do not apply to the Étang de Thau FLAG; rather than geographical proximity, a more organizational proximity is identified (Hammani et al., 2024) derived from the sectoral nature in which the strategy is oriented and the affinity and economies of scale in which the institutions in the fisheries sector operate. This prevents interaction among other socio-economic players and, as a result, fewer conflicts arise, but the character of development is less holistic.

To maintain the economic and social prosperity of fisherie areas, promote employment through diversification of activities, and improve coastal quality, it is necessary to integrating various sectors into the strategy to foster links among economic players. Programs must be based on versatility and the development of endogenous resources. The aim of these measures should be to increase the competitiveness of fishing areas, restructure and diversify economic activities, create added value for fisheries products, preserve the environment, and thus achieve a territorialization of programs.

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