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THE CONTRIBUTION OF LEADER TO THE EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL AREAS: THE CASE OF THE BRKINI REGION, SLOVENIA

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Abstract: The paper focuses on the local delivery process of the LEADER programme over two programming periods (2007–2013 and 2014–2020). We tried to find out whether the LEADER method and projects implemented have contributed to the empowerment of the Brkini region (Slovenia), which has characteristics of a lagging and structurally weak region influenced by peripheralization processes. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of LEADER projects underlined that the Brkini region was quite successful in *integrating* different actors and sectors in joint projects and establishing cooperation between stakeholders. Cooperation is reflected in (1) partnerships and networking between existing and new actors and stakeholders, (2) LEADER funds being mostly used for "smaller projects" and networking within the region, (3) the synergies between LEADER and existing local aspirations as it supports several areas of the multi-sectoral approach (i.e., tourism promotion, agricultural production and processing), (4) enhanced recognisability and promotion of the Brkini region at sub-regional, regional, national and cross-border levels. In the context of *empowerment*, we were able to identify some incentives, but also some bottlenecks (local clubs/societies/associations lack institutional, administrative and financial capacity, etc.). Decision-makers should pay special attention to this and also promote a culture of reflexivity when preparing new animation strategies for the next programming period.

Key words: neo-endogenous development, LEADER, rural development, reflexive thinking, Brkini region, Slovenia

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Izvleček: Prispevek se osredinja na proces izvajanja programa LEADER v lokalnem okolju, in sicer primerjalno v dveh programskih obdobjih (2007–2013, 2014–2020). Skušali smo ugotoviti, če so pristop LEADER in izvedeni projekti prispevali k opolnomočenju Brkinov (Slovenija), ki predstavljajo tipično razvojno zastajajoče in strukturno šibko podeželsko območje, na katerega vplivajo procesi periferizacije. Kvantitativna in kvalitativna analiza izvedenih projektov sta pokazali, da so bili Brkini uspešni pri *vključevanju* različnih akterjev in sektorjev v skupne projekte ter vzpostavljanju povezovanja med deležniki. *Sodelovanje* se zrcali v: (1) sodelovanju in mreženju med obstoječimi in novimi akterji in deležniki; (2) sredstva programa LEADER so večinoma namenjena »manjšim projektom« in mreženju znotraj ozemlja lokalne akcijske skupine; (3) program LEADER ustreza lokalnim prizadevanjem, saj podpira večsektorski pristop (npr. pri turistični promociji, kmetijski proizvodnji in predelavi); (4) v povečani prepoznavnosti in promociji Brkinov na subregionalni, regionalni, državni in čezmejni ravni. Z vidika *opolnomočenja* pa smo prepoznali nekaj pobud, hkrati pa tudi nekaj ozkih grl (lokalna društva nimajo dovolj institucionalnih, administrativnih in finačnih zmožnosti itd.). Odločevalci bi morali temu nameniti posebno pozornost in tudi promovirati kritičen razmislek glede procesa izvajanja programa LEADER, ko bodo pripravljali nove animacijske strategije za naslednje programsko obdobje.

Ključne besede: neoendogeni razvoj, LEADER, razvoj podeželja, kritičen razislek, Brkini, Slovenija

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Highlights

- Reflexive thinking on LEADER programme´s local delivery
- The Brkini region is analysed as a case study.
- Networking is an important characteristic of LEADER implementation
- Empowerment of rural regions is a long-term learning process

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1. Introduction

Slovenia (20,273 km^2, 2 million inhabitants), unlike other Central and Eastern European Countries (Konečny, 2019; Lampič et al., 2015), which joined the EU in 2004 or later, had significant prior experience in applying policies to address rural issues through regional and rural development policies. Since the 1970s, Slovenia has pursued a polycentric regional development approach. In the 1980s and 1990s, special legislative measures for demographically endangered border areas were implemented, and in the late 1990s, additional measures for "problem areas" were legislated (Kušar, 2005). In 1991, the holistic *Integrative Rural Development and Village Renovation* was established, which was active until 2002: this approach drew from the German *Dorferneuerung* and UK *Heritage Trail* approaches to rural development (CRPOV in Slovene; Koščak, 2016). In parallel, 31 territorially localized *Development Programs for Rural Areas* were further developed and implemented from 1996 to 2006. Before the introduction of the EU LEADER programme in 2007, Slovenia had almost 15 years of experience with the participatory approach to rural development ("a LEADER -like local development process"; Cunk Perklič, Zidar, Kah, 2020), although some important gaps were identified: lack of funding, modest formation of partnerships, lack of decentralized decision-making on project approval and funding, modest networking and integration between sectors, and limited experience in cross-border cooperation (e.g., PREPARE, PHARE CBC; Kokolj Prošek, 2006). During the pre-accession period and since the integration into the EU, several EU programmes and measures related to rural and regional development have been implemented in Slovenia, e.g., SAPARD (without LEADER), cross-border programs (CBC Small Project Fund, Interreg, Interreg Adrion, EUSAIR – European Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region, etc.).

The implementation of LEADER in Slovenia started with the 2007–2013 programming period: 33 Local Action Groups (LAGs) covered 95% of the national territory and 64% of the population; more than 1,400 projects were supported with € 30.7 million LEADER co-financing (exclusively from EAFRD). In the 2014–2020 period, the number of LAGs increased (37), the entire national territory was eligible for LEADER / CLLD (Community-Led Local Development) approach and funding (€ 95 million was available from EAFRD, ERDF, EMFF; Program razvoja podeželja za obdobje 2014–2020, 2015; Cunder and Bedrač, 2017). The Brkini region has been included in the LEADER programme since 2007.

Across the EU, LEADER has had several incarnations over the past 30 years and has brought important novelties. In practice, due to several factors, for instance, it is a less financially significant programme compared to other CAP measures and is seen as a laboratory for rural development initiatives (Ray, 2000; Gkartzios and Lowe, 2019), as one cannot expect LEADER to solve all problems in rural areas. A rich literature describes the role of LEADER in rural development. Recently, three suggestions have been made in LEADER research: first, a need for comparative international research (Granberg et al., 2015; Pollerman et al., 2020); second, to complement research on outputs with surveying the outcomes and local delivery process; and third, that a greater focus should be placed on the less quantifiable social, cultural and environmental impacts (Bosworth et al., 2015).

In this paper, we focused on the local delivery process and contribution of LEADER to the empowerment of the Brkini region in Slovenia. The region has the characteristics of an underdeveloped, less-developed or lagging region, impacted by peripheralization processes and exhibiting structural weakness. Such characteristics have been discussed in rural research (Terluin, 2001; Klemenčič, 2002; Mühlinghaus, 2002; Schmied, 2005; Klemenčič, 2006; Klemenčič et al., 2008; Potočnik Slavič, 2010; Lang, 2011; Copus and Hoernstroem, 2011; Farole et al., 2018, etc.). The Brkini region is a border and hilly rural area in the southwestern part of Slovenia, where a complex interrelation of several factors (e.g., geographical, demographic, socio-economic, institutional, governance, path dependency, etc.) has hindered local and regional development. The region is therefore very suitable for the implementation of the neo-endogenous development approach (Ray, 2006; Potočnik Slavič, 2010; Servillo, 2019), which is incorporated into the LEADER programme.

The research question being addressed in this paper is: how could the neo-endogenous aproach and thinking implemented through the LEADER programme contribute to the empowerment of rural regions? We analysed the LEADER projects in Brkini region and their impacts over two programming periods (2007–2013 and 2014–2020). The results are intended to help local, regional and national decision-makers in

the context of preparations for the new programming period (2021–2027) and to support the findings of critical rural research.

2. The Brkini region as an example of a lagging rural area

The Brkini region (300 km^2: ⅔ at an altitude of 400–600 m, ⅓ at an altitude of 600–800 m a.s.l.) is a predominantly flysch, hilly and sparsely populated (25 inhabitants/km^2) transitional geographical region between Sub-Mediterranean landscapes and Continental Slovenia. The region is characterised by its relative proximity to important transport corridors between Slovenia and neighbouring EU member states (Fig. 1): there are motorways from the capital Ljubljana to the ports of Koper/Capodistria (Slovenia), Trieste (Italy) and Rijeka (Croatia). The Brkini region is administratively divided into four municipalities (Divača, Ilirska Bistrica, Hrpelje-Kozina, Pivka). Notwithstanding its favourable geographical position, the Brkini region has had the status of a peripheral, border and dependent landscape for several centuries.

The political decision (taken already in the early 18th Century) for Trieste to become the main port of the Habsburg Monarchy created a special development framework for the Brkini region. Step by step, it became a typical hinterland area, concentrating on agricultural production (fruit, vegetables, wood, ice, etc.) and providing seasonal labour (mostly men in carpentry, masonry, as craftsmen, etc.) for the growing needs of the port and the growing city. The terraced landscape was intensively cultivated, and the products were supplied mainly to the growing markets of Trieste (more than 200,000 inhabitants in 1910) and Rijeka (which after 1867 became the most important port for the Hungarian part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy). After the First World War, when the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy disintegrated, the Brkini region was incorporated into the Kingdom of Italy (for the period 1920–1943): the region retained its former character as a dependent agricultural hinterland, oriented towards the needs of two growing cities and ports (Trieste and Rijeka).

After the World War II, the Brkini region was incorporated into the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and a new borderline between Yugoslavia and Italy was created: the port of Trieste became part of Italy, and the wider hinterland (including also Brkini region in Slovenia – as part of the Yugoslav federation) was completely detached from the former core area. Under these new political circumstances, the Brkini region managed to maintain economic relations with the port of Rijeka (in Croatia, also part of the Yugoslav Federation). After the London Memorandum in 1956 (when the border between Yugoslavia and Italy was formalised), Slovenia put a special focus on the development of the port of Koper/Capodistria (beforeWorld War II, it was a small port of local importance). Due to the changing political circumstances and decreasing demand for traditional agricultural products and labour (Trieste was cut off due to the Iron curtain), while the town and port of Koper/Capodistria lacked the capacity to absorb the surplus of agricultural products and labour, a major economic and social crisis affected the Brkini region. The agricultural market shrank, the new state of Yugoslavia favoured industrialisation and urbanisation: as a result, the Brkini region saw widespread abandonment of agriculture and demographic out-migration, the characteristic terraces with fruit orchards were abandoned to a considerable extent. For decades the region was subjected to unplanned and extensive forest overgrowth (forest covers 73% of the region, 15% are permanent meadows; Uhan et al., 2017). After the disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1991, a state border between the new states (Slovenia and Croatia) hindered economic cooperation between the Brkini region and the port of Rijeka, resulting in additional abandonment of agricultural practices and farmland.



Fig 1. Geographical location of the Brkini region. Source: Map database derived from NOAA OCS, Esri, DeLorme, geonames.org; Esri, DeLorme, NaturalVue, 2021

The collective population of 47 settlements within the Brkini region peaked at about 10,000 inhabitants at the end of the 19th Century (Klemenčič, 1956; Bekovič Krašovec, 2005; SURS, 2019; Fig. 2). At the beginning of the 20th Century, economic factors, especially an agrarian crisis and unemployment related to economic restructuring led to population out-migration from coastal cities (Trieste, Rijeka) and their hinterlands to overseas countries. The Brkini region faced several strong waves of population decline in the 20th Century. The negative population trend continued in the second half of the 20th Century: new political and economic circumstances led to processes of deagrarization and abandonment of agricultural land, and urbanization in the nearby agglomeration centers provided jobs in industry and services. A number of local small towns experienced growth – Ilirska Bistrica, Sežana, Hrpelje-Kozina. Brkini's residents also moved to regional centers, especially Koper/Capodistria, while additional emigration was stimulated by delayed modernization. As a result, the Brkini region lost almost 2/3 of its population in the last 120 years: 3,638 inhabitants were registered in 47 settlements in 2019 (SURS, 2020). This points to another important fact, namely that basic services (elementary school, grocery store, post office, parish, inn, various crafts, community center, etc.) were discontinued. This had a strong impact on the quality of life and encouraged further out-migration.

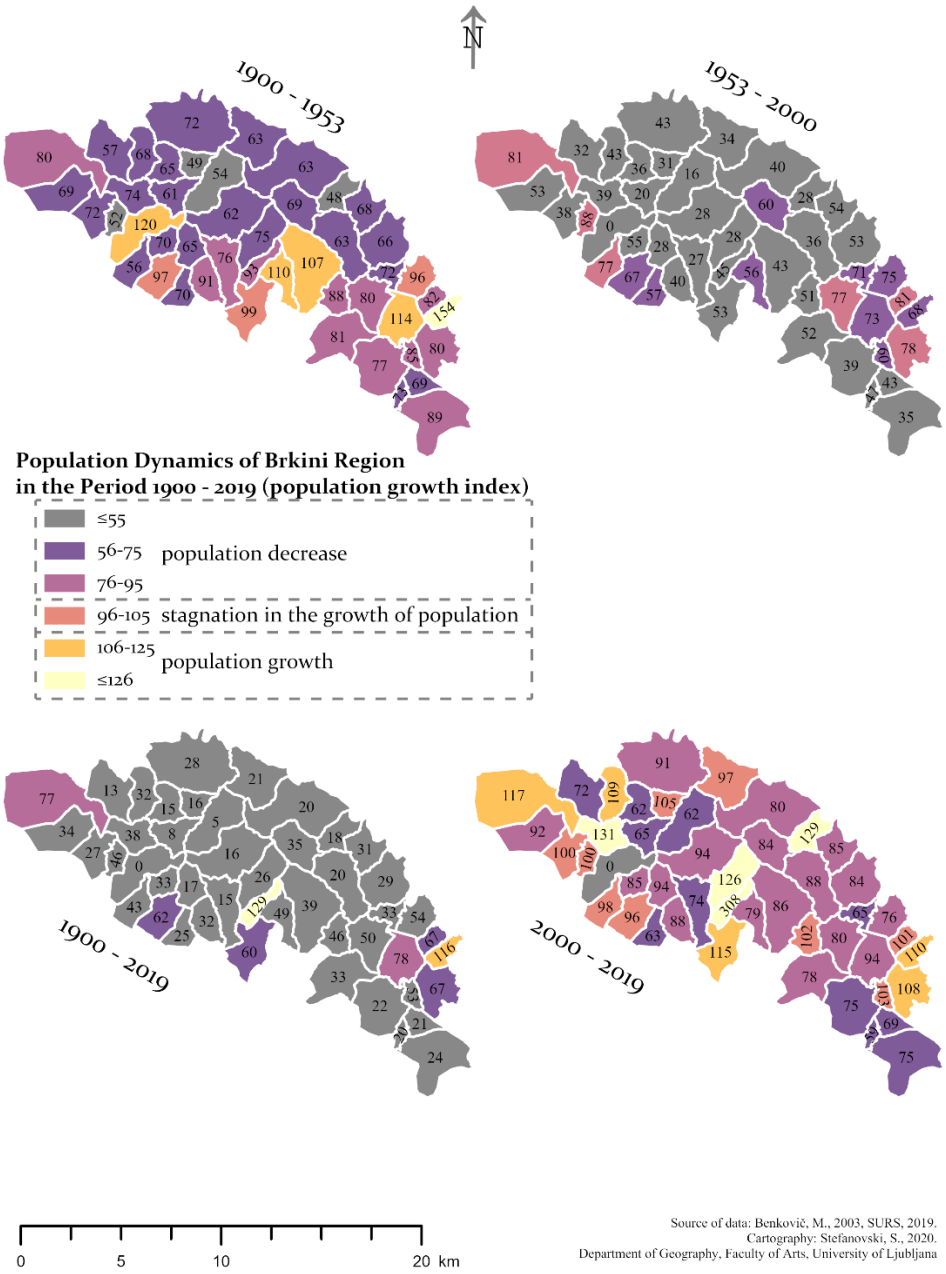


Fig 2. Population Dynamics of the Brkini region (1900–2019). Source: Benkovič, M., 2003; SURS, 2019

These negative demographic processes over a long period of time should not obscure some novel demographic trends of the last 20 years, during which the Brkini region experienced uneven demographic development. Two smaller clusters of population growth were observed: the first in the west (settlements of Rodik, Javorje, Slivje and Suhorje) and the second in the eastern outskirts of the Brkini region (settlements of Velika Bukovica and Zarečica). Both clusters were influenced by two factors: dynamic municipal developments (Hrpelje-Kozina, Ilirska Bistrica, Pivka, Divača) are scaled with the impact of regional development axes (either within the ports of Trieste-Koper/Capodistria-Rijeka or with the intraregional and cross-border axis Postojna-Pivka-Ilirska Bistrica-Rijeka). Population growth has been observed in settlements with 150–350 inhabitants and good accessibility, basic services and new housing estates. Relatively positive population dynamics are observed also in certain smaller settlements (often with less than 50 or between 51 and 100 inhabitants, including: Janeževo Brdo, Vatovlje, Vareje, Gabrk, Suhorje, Dobropolje, Artviže, Rjavče, Zajelšje, Soze, Brezovica, Gradišica. Positive demographic trends are attributed to in-migration: there are some examples of non-locals, returned migrants (young educated and elderly people) and locals who appreciate the attractiveness and favorable geographical location of

the Brkini region. The general demographic profile of the Brkini region is characterized by very intensive population aging, as the old-age dependency ratio is significantly less favorable than the ratio nationally.

3. Methodology

3.1 From neo-endogenous development towards neo-endogenous thinking

Rural development policy discourse has shifted considerably in recent decades, increasingly supporting participatory models of governance (Pollermann et al., 2020), interventions with a territorial dimension (Ray, 2000; Granberg et al., 2015) and innovative development strategies (Storey, 1999). Focusing on the European experience, we can observe shifting narratives from ideal paradigms of rural development policy across models. These range from exogenous to mixed endogenous-exogenous (Terluin, 2001), to entirely endogenous and neo-endogenous models (Ray, 2006; Bosworth et al., 2015). There is also the next shift from models towards approaches: for example, neo-endogenous (practised in a pan-European context as LEADER; Konečný, 2019) or the nexogenous approach (specifically focused on marginal rural areas; Bock, 2016). These critical contributions demonstrate that the demand for a single, all-inclusive approach or model or theory of rural development is no longer a requirement or a realistic expectation (Gkartzios and Lowe, 2019).

Endogenous development, despite its three main characteristics (development within a territorial framework; development activity that maximises benefits within the local territory through valorization and use of local resources; and, contextualised development, focusing on the needs, capacities and perspectives of the local population; Ray, 2006), has also been confronted in practice (i.e., in the experience of LEADER) with problems of participation, elitism, limitations of local action and control (Gkartzios and Lowe, 2019), and in the context of a globalised rural economy, it has been argued that endogenous development is not a realistic paradigm (Ward et al., 2005). It has been consistently suggested that there is a need for a hybrid model that goes beyond the endogenous and exogenous models, and Ray (2000) proposed the term neo-endogenous development to describe an approach to rural development that is locally rooted but outward looking and characterised by dynamic interactions between local areas and their wider environment.

Recently, there has been more discussion about neo-endogenous thinking. The practice of LEADER over the last 30 years shows that the contribution of the neo-endogenous thesis has not been to present a model of development, but rather a way of thinking about rural development and understanding how things work on the ground, to rationalise what actually happens in the locality, a way of thinking about how things work in practice, accepting that knowledge about rural development is produced by different actors (Gkartzios and Lowe, 2019). Neo-endogenous thinking represents a reflexive practice that requires and includes the involvement of different actors and seeks to understand their positionality in rural development. Central to the practice of neo-endogenous thinking is the ability to (self-)reflect on one's disciplinary perspectives and actions in producing knowledge to support rural policy (Gkartzios and Lowe, 2019). Therefore, this paper brings together the reflections on the local delivery process of LEADER in the Brkini region including the local population, the LAGs' staff, LEADER programme beneficiaries and academia.

3.2 Research approach: the triangle of LEADER implementation, empowerment of rural areas and neo-endogeneous reflexive thinking

The central question is: how does the neo-endogenous thinking implemented through the LEADER programme contribute to the empowerment of rural regions? The conceptual framework incorporates a deductive-inductive logic and is based on the assumption that reflexive thinking enables continuous co-creation and knowledge exchange, which is reflected in the empowerment of rural regions. The framework is constructed on three basic features of rural empowerment stimulated by the practice of LEADER (Fig. 3).

(1) **Empowerment of the rural region is a process.** We followed the logic of three phases: integration, participation and empowerment. According to Storey (1999), empowerment is frequently discussed together with integration and participation. Integration usually refers to the inclusion of all sectors of the rural economy and to the involvement of all interested parties. Participation focuses on the idea that local people should be involved in the process of formulating development strategies for their own areas. With empowerment identified as the further stage in this process, where participation is more than nominal and people have a real and effective say in strategy formulation (Storey, 1999).

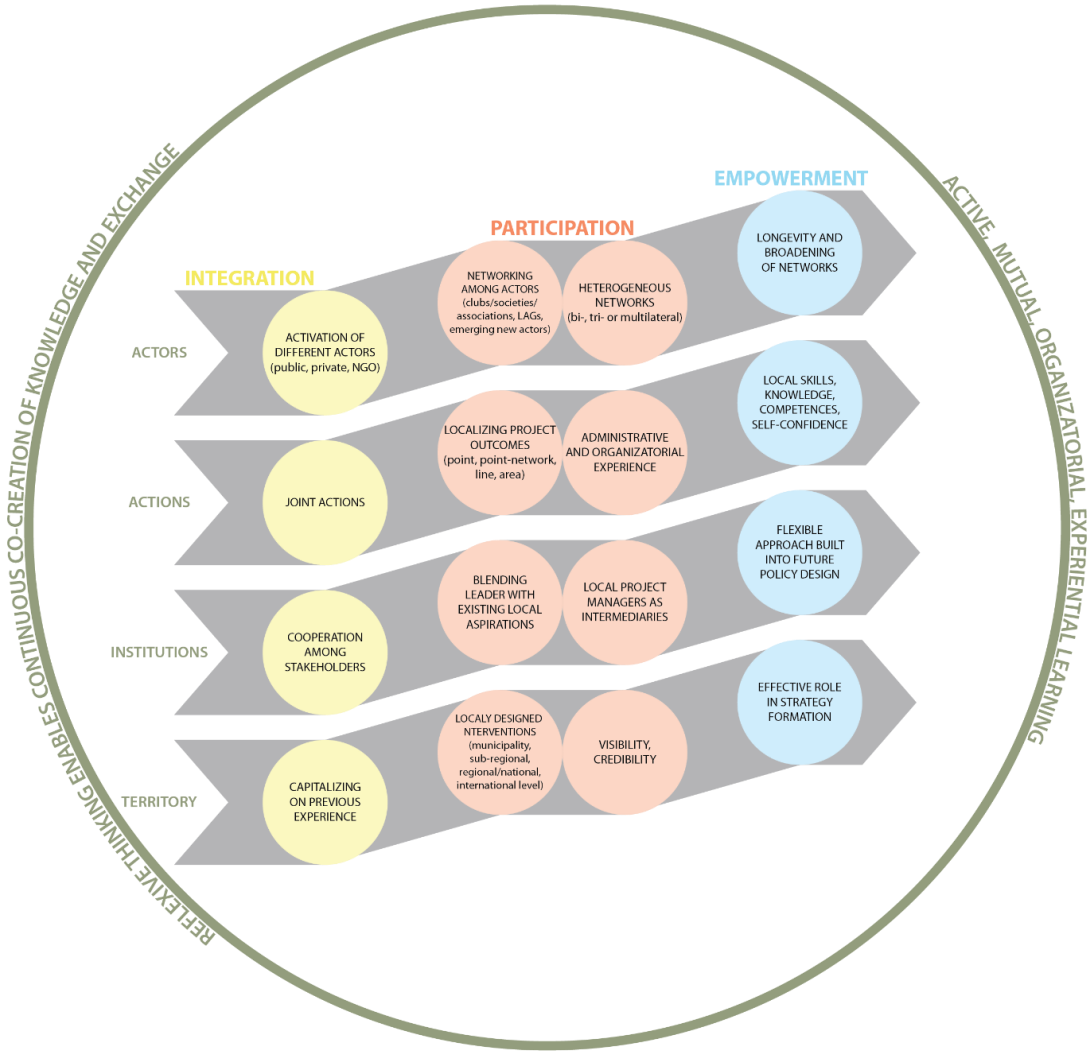


Fig 3. Framing the contribution of neo-endogenous reflexive thinking (LEADER practices) to empowerment of rural region. Source: own survey

(2) **The process of empowering rural regions can be discerned through analysis of the key elements (actors, actions, institutions, territory) which are incorporated in the LEADER programme.**

Actors. It is important to integrate all groups and sectors (e.g., LEADER lists public, private, and NGOs), being aware that in practice, some people will be active on multiple initiatives, whereas others are not going to be involved at all. Bosworth et al.'s (2015) research included a stakeholder survey in which beneficiaries reported, *"LEADER really mobilises the local community!"* Participation requires networking between different actors, quite often it leads to collaboration between more actors (bi-, tri- or multilateral). Empowered actors in rural regions are most effective in heterogeneous networks. It is also essential that the networks have longevity and can be expanded.

Actions. LEADER aims to integrate local actors and decision-makers in joint work on projects (actions, interventions). Participation in locally designed interventions that address local needs leads to tangible

outcomes (for example: a newly established meeting place or a collaboratively developed thematic trail) or has an impact on the whole rural region. Participation opens up opportunities for local actors and institutions to gain administrative and organisational experience. LEADER actions empower rural regions with local skills, knowledge, competences and self-confidence.

Institutions. Under the LEADER programme, special attention is given to integration of various institutional stakeholders (who usually form the backbone of rural regions) to promote their cooperation. Existing institutions already participate in several programmes, interventions, etc., so it is important that previous experiences and current local aspirations are blended with LEADER. Important key facilitators (intermediaries) emerge within participating institutions: local project managers often fulfill this crucial role. Empowered institutions in rural areas emerge through the effective building of social capital at the local level and are also more flexible in designing future policy.

Territory. LAGs and LEADER territories with previous LEADER experience have often been more effective as they were better able to adapt to change and were more familiar with approaches to partnership working. Actors and institutions participate in locally designed actions (interventions) with visible results in the LEADER territory (in the municipality, sub-region, region, etc.). The implementation of the programme and projects stimulates a joint evaluation that contributes to the visibility and credibility of the LEADER programme. The LEADER territory is empowered since its actors and institutions take an effective role in future strategy formation.

(3) **The empowerment of rural regions is a learning process.** Neo-endogenous thinking represents a reflexive practice that forces people to rethink, reflect, and engage with their social environment. Schoen (1983, cited in Gkartzios and Lowe, 2019) sees reflection as a dialog of thinking and doing, and in LEADER implementation, there are different types of learning that contribute to the empowerment of rural actors, actions, institutions and territories. In project implementation, the focus is on active learning, with engaged actors (project partners, local people, etc.) actively involved in the learning process. In a network, mutual learning enables leaders and their teams to work more effectively. Institutions practice organizational learning as the process of creating, retaining, and transferring knowledge within an organization in relation to its functions and culture. And territories (along with actors, actions, and institutions) participate in experiential learning, which is more accurately defined as "learning by reflecting on doing." In line with neo-endogenous thinking and the empowerment of rural regions, this emphasizes that reflection does not only take place within oneself or within individual actors, but also requires actors to continuously seek feedback in order to understand the experiences of other actors.

3.3 Data collection

For the analysis of LEADER local delivery processes and the empowerment of the Brkini region, a comprehensive array of data was collected from four sources (Fig. 4). Within the research, quantitative and qualitative methods were applied.

(1) The role of LEADER in Slovenia is defined in the National Rural Development Programme (2015). Since the Brkini region is split between two LAGs (LAG Between Mt. Snežnik and Mt. Nanos, LAG of Karst and Brkini region), two **local development strategies** were analyzed for two funding periods (2007–2013 and 2014–2020). In addition, data on **LEADER projects** were collected from the implementation and monitoring reports, and on the LAGs´ websites. The research included data on projects approved by managing authorities until 31.12.2019, therefore projects implemented in 2020 and 2021 are not included in our analysis.

(2) Every five years (since 2000), we have conducted a **longitudinal survey** in the selected settlements of the Brkini region. Field surveys include questionnaires for the local population (demographic, spatial, economic and social analysis) and semi-structured interviews with stakeholders (representatives of local societies/clubs/associations, municipalities, public institutions). The quantitative and qualitative data collected indicate the ongoing delivery processes, but also point to some novel trends (in-migration in a few settlements, willingness to cooperate) and individual local initiatives (related to entrepreneurship in agriculture and tourism).

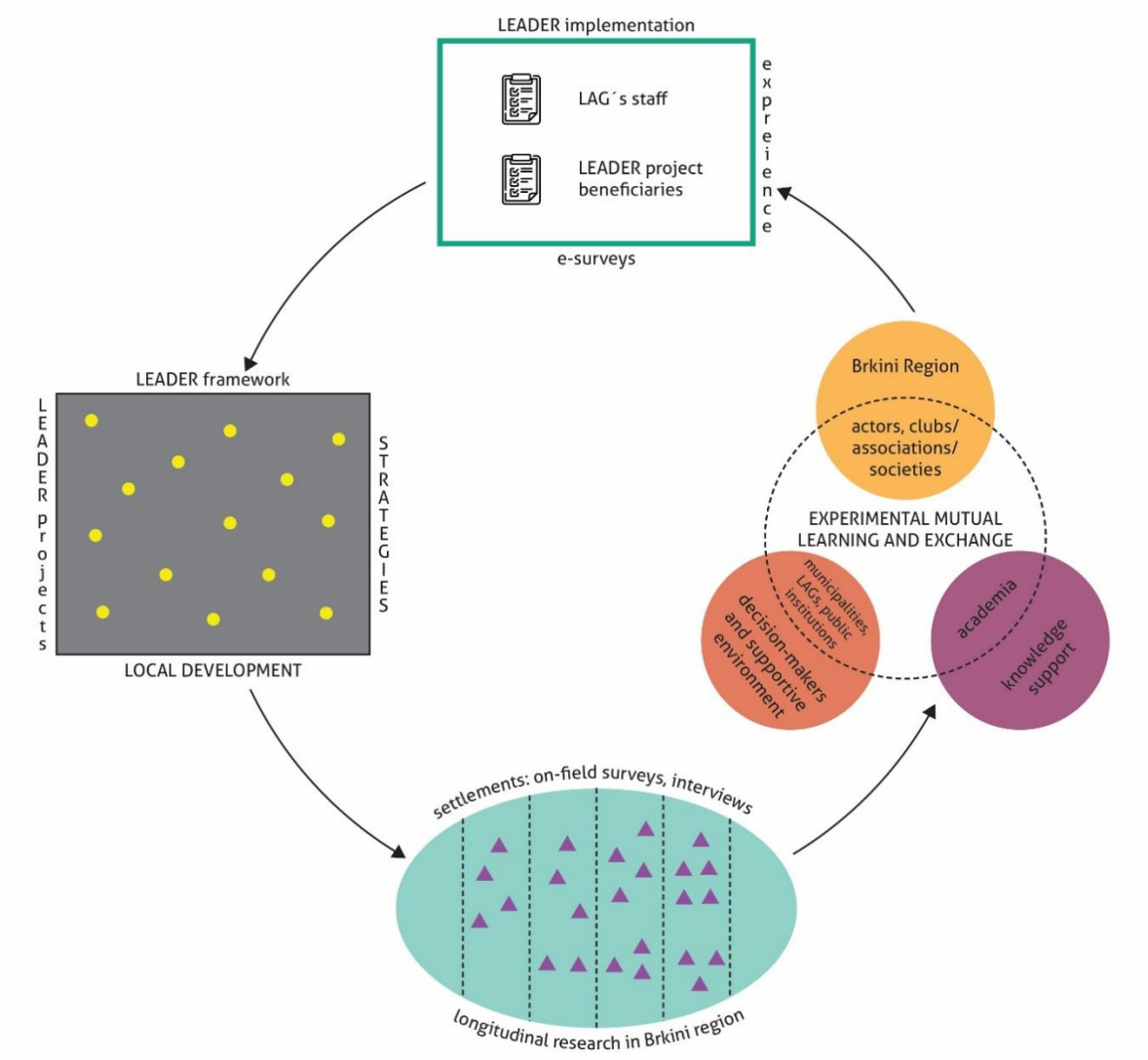


Fig 4. The "process" of data collection in our research. Source: own survey

(3) Based on the results of our longitudinal study, we developed an **experimental mutual learning and exchange process** involving the rural population (different actors, clubs/associations/societies), decision-makers and institutions in the Brkini region (i.e., the LAG Between Mt. Snežnik and Mt. Nanos, municipalities, public institutions, etc.) as well as academia (Department of Geography at the University of Ljubljana). Together with students who participated in the courses »Geography of Rural Areas« (BSc level), »Developmental Inequalities in Rural Areas« and »Endogenous Rural Development« (both MSc level of the Geography programme), several project ideas were developed to test: how the principles and ideas of neo-endogenous development work in practice and whether the public, private organizations and NGOs are willing to cooperate in project implementation within the Brkini region.

(4) In the year 2020, two targeted **e-surveys** (due to COVID-19 circumstances) were conducted among 19 LAGs in Slovenia (out of 1632 entries, we were able to include 278 completed forms in our analysis) from May to August 2020, including LAG Between Mt. Snežnik and Mt. Nanos. The first e-survey was targeted at LAG staff (brief description of projects and their impacts, comments on LAG and LEADER implementation), while the second e-survey was targeted at project beneficiaries, i.e., mainly project leaders and project partners (evaluation of LAG, implementation of projects, recognition and future role of the LEADER programme in rural areas). At the beginning, we intended to analyze the responses of each LAG separately, but due to the modest response rate, we could only perform basic descriptive statistics for all participating LAGs. 2/3 of the responses were provided by women, 60% were

completed by people aged 41–60, 80% had formal education at level 6 or above according to European Qualification Level, and slightly less than half lived in their municipality's main settlement.

Overall, by linking and comparing different data sources, we went about neo-endogenous reflexive thinking in the manner identified by Schoen (1983), i.e., *"a dialogue of thinking and doing through which I become more skilled".* This enabled us to gain different insights into the LEADER local delivery and the empowering process of the Brkini region.

4. Analysis of the LEADER local delivery process

To gain a better understanding of the LEADER delivery process at local and sub-regional levels, we focused on 168 projects funded in the above LAGs over the two programming periods. Quantitative data were analyzed (number of projects, priorities, financial resources allocated, partners), but also qualitative data (project reports, activities and events).

Observing the implemented projects from the perspective of the LEADER local delivery process and its contribution to the empowerment of the Brkini region, we addressed three impacts: territorial, spatial and networking.

4.1 The establishment of the LEADER territory in the Brkini region was based on administrative and functional areas

The announcement of the LEADER programme provided a rationale for building new local policy spaces. According to the regulation, a LEADER territory must have a genuine local identity rather than linking neighboring established administrative units (Moseley, 2003). The local territory has been able to opportunistically adapt its pre-existing agendas to take advantage of LEADER funds: some neighboring territories were merged even though they had only a very modest shared identity, and vice versa (Ray, 1998). LEADER often led to the formation of new institutionalized rural territories, which in turn became "brands" for selling the regions (Woods, 2011).

In the case of the Brkini region, local identity could be invoked, but it would be illusory to expect a unique Brkini region LEADER territory to emerge. The region itself did not have enough inhabitants (less than 4,000 in 2000; SURS, 2019), and it also lacked institutional capacity (i.e., organizations capable of managing the LEADER programme). In practice, several LEADER territories across Slovenia and in the EU (TELI2, 2018) were created on the basis of existing administrative units (by connecting several neighboring municipalities according to the LEADER /CLLD regulation) and their changing boundaries and/or by using existing physical geographical and landscape features (mountains, valleys, etc.) or socio-cultural and historical local/regional identities emanating from the territory.

The Brkini region traverses two LEADER territories and each with its own LAG (Fig. 5).

- **LAG of Karst and Brkini region**: includes the western part of the Brkini region (two municipalities: Hrpelje-Kozina and Divača). The LAG belongs to the group of medium-sized LAGs in Slovenia. During the 2007–2013 period, four neighbouring municipalities (660 km^2) with almost 26,000 inhabitants were connected, and the LAG has a very low population density (39 inh./km^2). There were some changes in the size of the LEADER territory: in the 2014–2020 period, three municipalities were connected (557 km^2). In the period 2007–2013, the LAG invested €0.6 million from LEADER funds, and in 2014–2020, the LAG territory was allocated about €1.7 million (EAFRD and ERDF). The LAG focuses on local (Hrpelje and Kozina, almost 1,300 inhabitants in total) and regional centres (Sežana, almost 6,000 inhabitants). These two municipalities have the geographical characteristics of a "contact", i.e., (K)karst (predominant limestone, no surface water, karst land formation, etc.) and the Brkini region (combination of limestone and flysch, terraced landscape, higher altitudes, etc.).

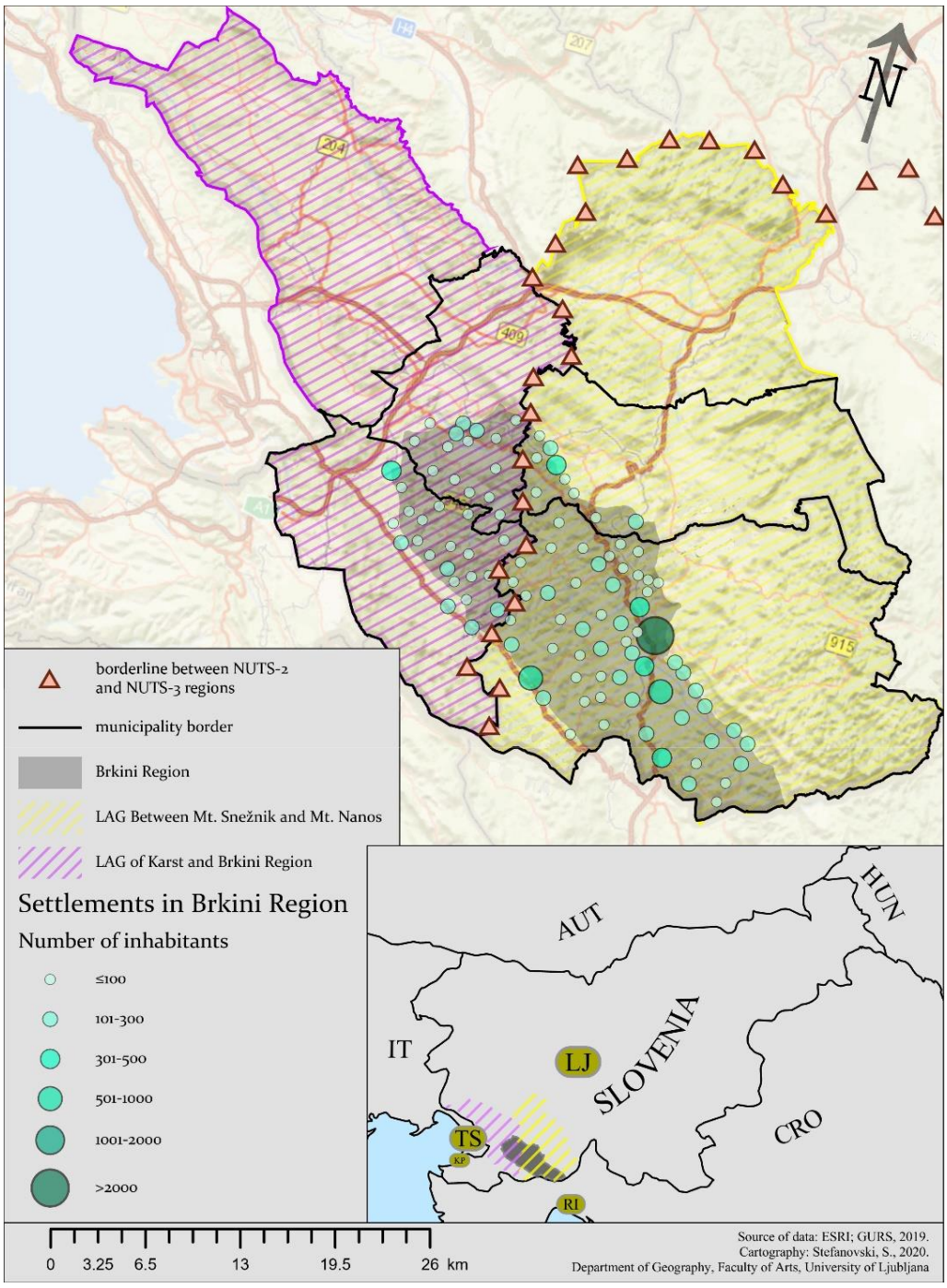


Fig 5. Formation of LAGs territories in relation to Brkini region. Source: ESRI; GURS, 2019

- **LAG Between Mt. Snežnik and Mt. Nanos**: includes the central and eastern part of the Brkini region (two municipalities: Ilirska Bistrica and Pivka). The LAG is one of the larger (973 km^2) LAGs in Slovenia, connecting three neighbouring municipalities with almost 36,000 inhabitants, while there is a very low population density (37 inh./km^2). In the period 2007–2013, the LAG invested €1.4 million from LEADER, in the period 2014–2020, the territory was allocated about €2.5 million (from EAFRD and ERDF). The LAG is focused on employment centres (Pivka, Neverke) and a supra-local centre (Ilirska Bistrica with 4,500 inhabitants). The "contact" of karst and flysch land formations is also relevant here, but the LAG territory was framed and named after two visible physical geographical features (mountains).

The development of a functional rather than an administrative area is a key difference between the LEADER/CLLD approach and traditional top-down approaches (Ray, 1998; Granberg et al., 2015, etc.). Local actors (or local partnerships, i.e., LAGs) are to decide on the most appropriate boundaries of LEADER

territories to achieve their objectives within the boundaries proposed at the national level (Guidance for Implementation of the LEADER …, 2014, p. 15). The bifurcation of the Brkini region is reflected in several administrative subdivisions at the national and EU level: LAU-2 (or NUTS-5: the Brkini region is divided into 4 municipalities), LAU-1 (or NUTS -4: 3 administrative units), NUTS-3 (2 statistical regions) and NUTS-2 level (2 cohesion regions). The establishment of the LEADER territory followed the practical combination of administrative and functional areas, which contributed to the permanent fragmentation of the Brkini region. This asymmetry (Bosworth et al., 2015) between statutory LEADER boundaries and the locally identified space (e.g., the Brkini region) creates certain practical problems in LEADER implementation (e.g., neighbouring settlements belonging to different municipalities and different LAGs are not part of the same project) and some fuzziness in assessing LEADER impacts. The exact boundaries of the intervention should be considered as something fluid that can be adapted to changing circumstances. These issues could be solved with cooperation projects between neighbouring LAGs.

4.2 Addressing the needs of the local territory

Comparing the Local Development Strategies of the two LAGs (Strategija lokalnega razvoja za LAS Krasa in Brkinov …, 2016; Strategija lokalnega razvoja za LAS Med Snežnikom in Nanosom, 2015), we have listed identical thematic fields (creation of new and maintenance of existing jobs, development of basic services to promote the quality of life in rural areas, environmental protection and nature conservation, and inclusion of the young population, women and other vulnerable groups) and main objectives for two programming periods. The objectives include:

(1) the need for cooperation and networking between local actors and partners;

(2) stimulating entrepreneurship (also social entrepreneurship) with the development of an appropriate supportive environment and useful knowledge, skills and competencies;

(3) improving and conserving the natural environment: supporting innovative approaches and contemporary practices, coexistence with wildlife, raising environmental awareness;

(4) supporting social cohesion and inclusion of all groups, with special attention to intergenerational cooperation, friendly ageing, inclusion of vulnerable groups in the labour market;

(5) improving the quality of life (development of social, tourist, cultural, recreational and transport infrastructure) not only in centres but also in dispersed settlements;

(6) stimulating the use of local products and services by supporting agriculture and local food supply.

The thematic fields and objectives are reflected in the projects: we analysed 168 projects carried out by both LAGs during the two programming periods. More than half were territorially focused on the needs of a single municipality (Fig. 6), 30% concerned the sub-regional level corresponding to the territories of both LAGs, every tenth project reached the regional level (also cross-border, cooperation between LAGs also from other parts of Slovenia). Comparing the two programming periods, it is noticeable that in the 2014–2020 period, the focus was more on networking between municipalities and accordingly more projects were funded at the sub-regional level (two LAGs territories).

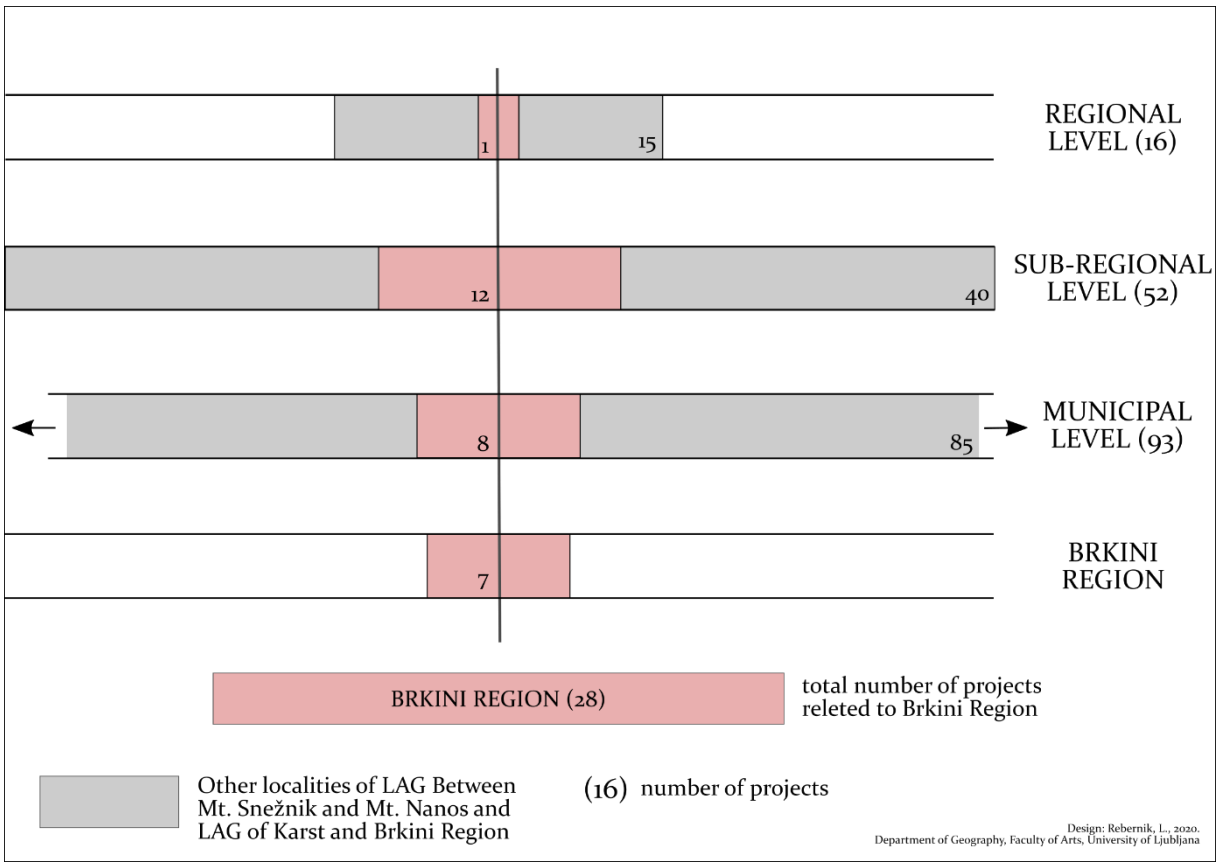
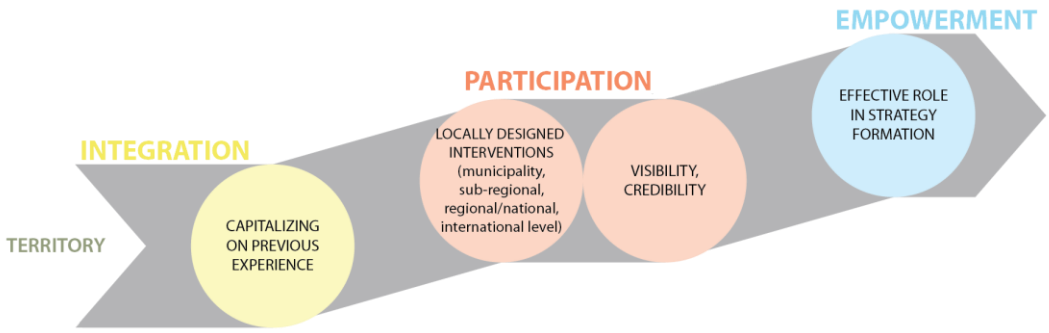


Fig 6. The territorial impact of the implemented projects – for the LAG Between Mt. Snežnik and Mt. Nanos, and the LAG of Karst and Brkini region (for the periods 2007–2013, and 2014–2020). Source: LEADER projects, 2007–2013, 2014–2020, MKGP, MGRT, 2020.



28 projects (or 17% of the total number of implemented projects) were directly related to the Brkini region, and usually the projects were focused on 3–4 objectives. Our analysis has shown that there is a lot of interest in placing projects in the Brkini region, reflecting its needs as a lagging region. According to the available data, approximately €945,000 had been invested in the Brkini region up to December 2019 (when just over half of all allocated 2014–2020 funding was spent within the both LAGs). The investments were mostly channeled into the areas identified as weak (Potočnik Slavič, 2008; Strategija lokalnega razvoja za LAS Krasa in Brkinov …, 2016; Strategija lokalnega razvoja za LAS Med Snežnikom in Nanosom, 2015) – i.e., marketing and promotion of the Brkini region, its products and services (also related to local food provision and processing), and tourism development (Garrod et al., 2006). Investments in cultural heritage (studies and project documentation for renovation) and education (mainly skills and competences in agriculture and entrepreneurship) were also important. The LEADER local delivery confirms that integration and participation was addressed well, but the real empowerment of the territory

has not yet been achieved: the local population does not take an effective role in strategy formation, inhabitants mostly participate on basis of top-down stimulation.

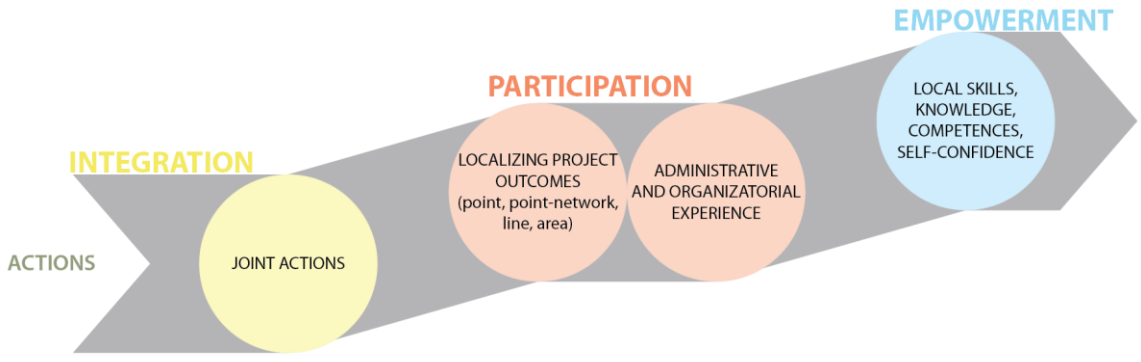
4.3 LEADER projects as actions contributing to the empowerment of rual areas

18 projects were implemented in the period 2007–2013, with a further 10 till the end of 2019. From a financial point of view, of the total 28 projects, 9 small projects (up to €20,000 co-financing from LEADER funds) were implemented, 8 of which in the period 2007–2013 (Tab. 1). In the period 2014–2020, it appeared that the applicants prepared mostly larger projects (6 projects in the category of €40,001–50,000, 2 projects were co-financed with €100,000), which also reflects the more complex operations, the availability of sufficient administrative and financial capacities and the bi- or trilateral networking of the partners.

Tab 1. Number of LEADER projects implemented in the Brkini region according to the amount of LEADER co-financing. Source: LEADER projects, 2007–2013, 2014–2020, MKGP, MGRT, 2020.

Category (in €)/period/ number of projects	**LAG Between Mt. Snežnik and Mt. Nanos**		**LAG of Karst and Brkini region**	
	2007–2013	**2014–2019**	**2007–2013**	**2014–2019**
up to 10,000	1	1	2	0
10,001–20,000	1	0	4	0
20,001–30,000	4	1	3	0
30,001–40,000	0	0	1	0
40,001–50,000	0	3	0	3
50,001–60,000	1	0	0	0
60,001–70,000	1	0	0	0
100,000	0	0	0	2
Total	*8*	*5*	*10*	*5*
No. of projects/LAG	*13 projects*		*15 projects*	

Smaller projects (up to €10,000 LEADER funds) in the first period were usually implemented in cooperation between a municipality and a society/club/association and focused on producing promotional material or supporting their regular activities. Medium-sized projects (€20,000–30,000) were also mostly implemented in the 2007–2013 period and dealt with tourism promotion (of thematic trails, ethnological collections, cultural heritage). Quite often, projects in the Brkini region were funded with €40,000–50,000 LEADER funds being invested in thematic tourism promotion campaigns (for fishermen, gastronomy) or in heritage conservation (skills and equipment for brandy production) or in entrepreneurial education and intergenerational cooperation. Cultural heritage restoration projects (castle) or investments in infrastructure (camper parks, community centre) received more funding.



We analysed project reports and tried to classify what we call the spatial impact of the actions (LEADER projects):

- where the project focused on a specific **point in the rural locality** (e.g., restoration of a castle, a single site),

- where several partners created a **network around a specific point** (e.g., multi-stakeholder collaboration in the establishment of a museum dedicated to local carnival customs);

- where the project stimulated a **linear spatial configuration** (e.g., establishment of a thematic trail);

- or where the project involved a **larger area with multiple actors** (e.g., promoting organic farmers and selling points for their products).

It can be seen that numerous projects combined multiple elements of spatial impact (point-network or point-network-area, etc.). There is an important difference in the spatial impact of the projects implemented in the Brkini region compared to the whole list of projects across both LAGs (Fig. 7). While in 2007–2013, several projects in the Brkini region addressed the "point" (castle, community centre), the majority of projects in the first and second programming periods centred around networking of actors or places (farmers' markets) involving a wider area and multiple actors. With this, we can confirm that participation (by localizing project outcomes and gaining sufficient administrative and organizatorial experience) is evident. Empowerment was another important impact to emerge: participating inhabitants could improve their knowledge on selected topics, maintain the local skills and reach several competences.

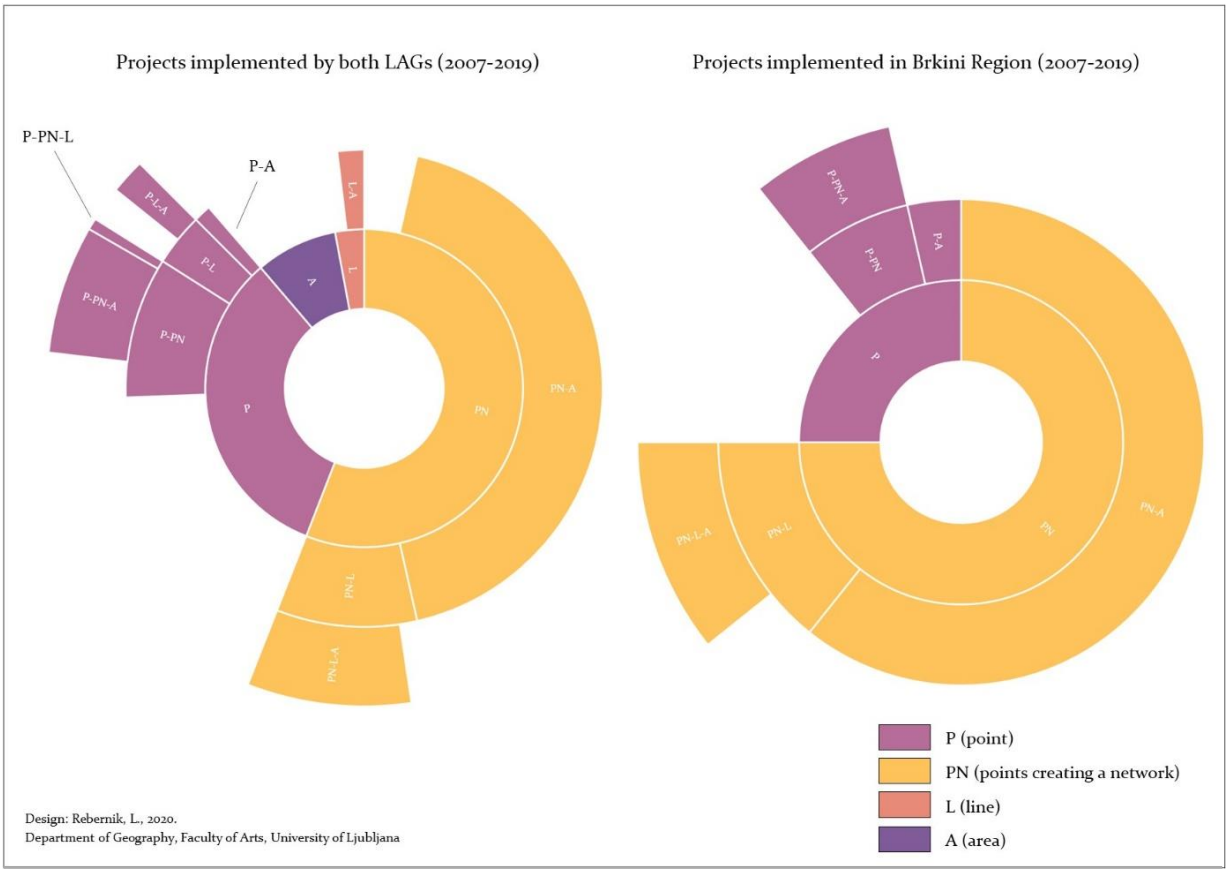
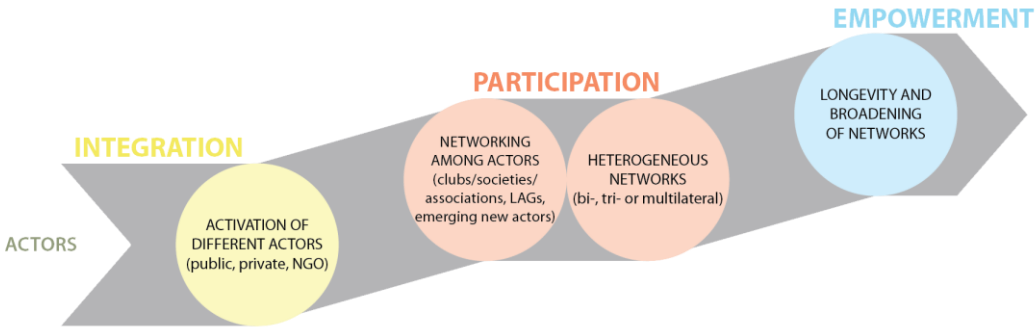


Fig 7. Spatial impact of LEADER projects – comparison between all projects (N=168) and projects implemented in the Brkini region (N=28). Source: LEADER projects, 2007–2013, 2014–2020, MKGP, MGRT, 2020.

4.4 Networking impact of LEADER projects: empowerment of local actors

Both LAGs have established partnerships according to the LEADER Regulation:

- LAG Between Mt. Snežnik and Mt. Nanos consists of 20 partners (2020 data): public sector represents 35% (7 partners), private sector covers 40% of members (8), 5 partners (25%) represent civil society interests;
- 62 partners are members of LAG of Karst and Brkini region: 9 partners (14.5%) are from the public sector, 18 (29%) from the private sector and 35 partners (56.5%) from civil society.



The beneficiaries of the projects related to the Brkini region (28 projects) are mostly members of the LAGs mentioned above. 20 projects were led by a public institution (municipality or public institute or regional development agency that created a functional network related to the project objectives). Only four projects had a lead partner from the private sector (for example: two or more individual entrepreneurs, a social enterprise owner, or a newly established network of different partners led by an individual entrepreneur). Four projects were led by LAG structures; mostly when the objective was to promote the whole region, or when the local community was institutionally unable to implement the project – mainly due to the insufficient administrative capacity or lack of financial resources such as in instances where the applicant was a club/society/association.

There is a very interesting distribution of actors and stakeholders that were involved in the projects implemented in the Brkini region (Fig. 8):

- **single actor operations** (10 projects): the main role was played by a single municipality or by the municipality in collaboration with a local association/club/society within the municipality (7); or else, entrepreneurs (2) or public institutions (1) led the project;
- **bilateral cooperation** (10 projects) where there were links between a municipality(-ies) and public institution(s) (5), entrepreneurs (3) or local clubs/societies/associations (2);
- **tri- or multilateral networking** (8 projects): between municipalities – public institutions – entrepreneurs (2), between local clubs/associations/societies – municipalities – public institutions (3), or when the project was run by a LAG where different partners worked together (3).

Integration and participation of actors is evident, with networking among actors and the construction of heterogeneous networks. There are several indicators that also empowerment of actions has been developed: some partners have experiences in joint work over two programming periods, however the networks have not been expanded.

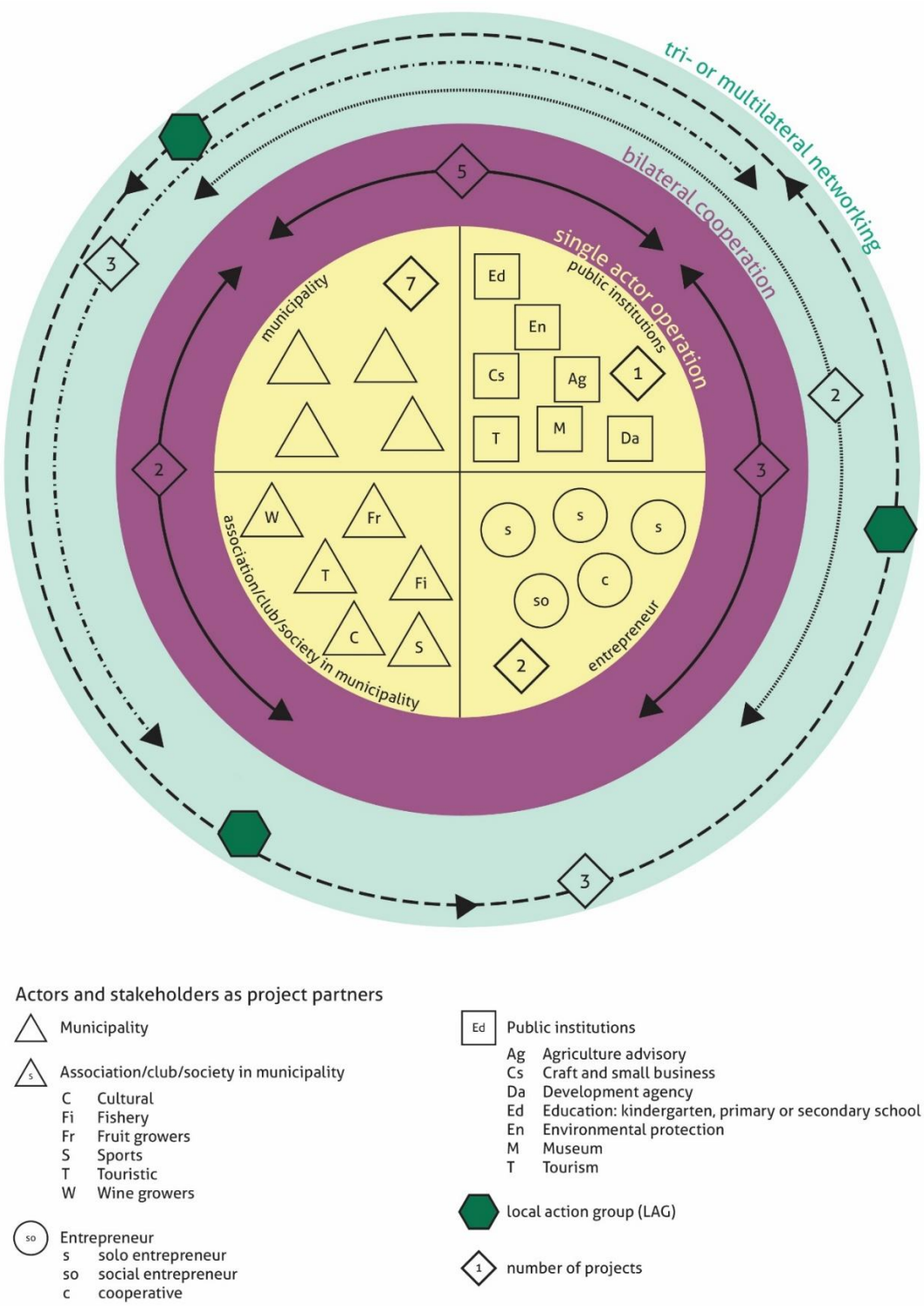
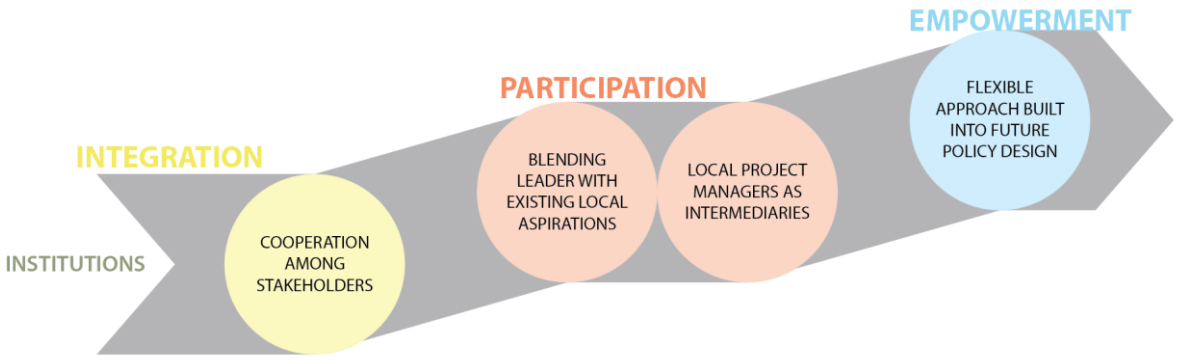


Fig 8. Networking between actors and stakeholders on the projects implemented in the Brkini region (2007–2019). Source: LEADER projects, 2007–2013, 2014–2020, MKGP, MGRT, 2020

4.5 Institutional weakness

The analysis of the actors and stakeholders involved in both LAGs and the beneficiaries of all projects in the Brkini region points to an important weakness of the region – institutional capacity is mostly practiced in the form of community organisations (clubs/associations/societies for fruit growers, some tourism, sports and cultural associations).

Previous research (Barborič et al., 2002; Potočnik Slavič, 2008) argues that due to the administrative fragmentation of the Brkini region and a dispersed settlement structure, it is not surprising that there is a lack of cooperation. By 1998, community activity had been sporadically and modestly activated. The longest running community organisations were two hunting clubs (founded in the 1970s), in 1991, the fruit-growing club was founded, while two clubs (registered in 1990 and 1997) had a focus on cultural-sport-tourist activities at the village level. By 1999, only seven local community organisations were registered in the region. By 2006, another 12 had been added, largely as a result of rural development policy on the national level that supported local activation and engagement. An even stronger renaissance in community organisations has been observed since 2007, with a further 20 diverse clubs/associations/societies registered by 2020.



Consequently, we identified strong bonding capital (connections within community organisations) at the local level. Within the four municipalities, there are 39 registered community organisations, which are based in one of 20 settlements of the Brkini region or else have the keyword "Brkini" in their official name (Register društev, 2020). There are three strong domains of community activity in the Brkini region, which contribute to quality of life in the region. The most important domain, involving almost 56% (22 out of 39) of the registered clubs/societies/associations, is culture-tourism-sport (in some settlements, one club often covers several areas: culture, tourism, music, history, ethnography, sports, development, different generations). The second domain is sport (12 or 31%), and the third consists of professional associations (5 or 13%), i.e., mainly fruit growers, fruit processors and hunters. Bonding social capital, identified by the number of local clubs and their domain of activity, with regular "face-to-face" meetings, common interests, norms and trust, is an indicator of cooperation and networking. As the Brkini region has been strongly affected by the long-term erosion of human capital due to permanent out-migration and by the weakening of internal connections due to heavy daily commuting, we identified weak bridging and linking social capital due to the lack of a critical number of people and insufficient commitment to the progress and development of a broader region ("outside one's village").

It is interesting that three municipalities (Ilirska Bistrica – 6 projects, Hrpelje-Kozina – 2, Pivka 1) designed projects allocating LEADER funds in a settlement or in the local environment: they invested in the renovation of cultural heritage (a castle and a hospital from World War II), in the activation of cultural heritage (organization of the traditional plum festival, renovation of a room with local carnival customs, opening of a new thematic trail) and in social strengthening (equipping the meeting place in the settlement, support for regular activities and promotion of local associations/clubs/societies). Three projects were organized by the LAGs themselves (as a sub-regional network): two projects focused on the Brkini Fruit Trail (education of fruit producers and processors, promotion), with another promoting the Brkini region as a whole. These three projects tried to solve the main bottleneck of the Brkini region: there is no overarching institution and LAGs took over this role.

Public institutions obviously have an important role as lead LEADER partners, all of which are located outside Brkini region: they work in the field of agriculture (Agriculture and Forestry Service), environmental protection (Park Škocjanske Caves – UNESCO Heritage Site), regional development (RD agency of Karst and Brkini region, RD agency Zeleni kras), education (primary school, public university)

and business (Regional Chamber of Craft and Small Business). They mostly participate in projects where bilateral, tri- or multilateral cooperation links municipalities either with public institutions or entrepreneurs, or with local clubs/societies/associations. Institutional involvement in LEADER local delivery points to integration, while participation is practiced by blending LEADER with existing local aspirations. We hope that more openess among the institutions will lead also to future empowerment of institutions.

4.6 LAGs encourage more cooperation at sub-regional, national and cross-border level

In the past, cooperation between the four municipalities was really poor. However, since the inception of the LEADER programme, municipalities within the same and neighbouring LAGs have been more open to collaboration (towards bridging social capital). The LEADER principles, partnership structure and financial resources support collaboration at the sub-regional level. The LAG of Karst and Brkini region participated in joint-projects with other LAGs in the period 2007–2013 (together with LAG Mt. Snežnik – promotion of the region), in the period 2014–2020, it was involved in two cooperative projects – in the fields of gastronomy and environmental protection (one is with LAG Between Mt. Snežnik and Mt. Nanos). The leading role in this regard goes to LAG Between Mt. Snežnik and Mt. Nanos, which has the most widespread network among LAGs in Slovenia, as well as with LAGs in neighbouring countries and further afield. In the period 2014–2020, this LAG was involved in five projects of cooperation with LAGs in Slovenia: in the fields of traditional crafts, local food supply for public institutions (kindergartens, schools, senior homes), environmental protection (biosphere reserves) and tourism. This strong orientation towards networking, can be attributed to the transitional character of the region, but also to the capacities of facilitators (intermediaries) and willingness for cooperation among all partners/institutions involved.

4.7 Academia in reflexive neo-endogenous thinking and practice

The Brkini region became a case study region for geographical field research in the 1950s; since 2000, a constant collaboration with local stakeholders has been established and developed. Longitudinal surveys over the last 20 years (Barborič et al., 2002; Potočnik Slavič, 2008 and several consecutive years) in different settlements of the Brkini region have helped in identifying several endogenous development potentials. Cooperation with the Tourist Information Center, primary schools, various clubs/societies/organizations, entrepreneurs, residents and LAGs, has led to mutual learning and exchange. Several student research projects (2015, 2016, 2017, 2018) focused on testing new development opportunities to build on the existing countryside capital of the Brkini region. First, the idea of a dispersed hotel in the settlement of Prem was developed (Kranjc, 2015): residents did not support the idea, but a few years later, it was effectively embedded in the settlement of Sviščaki with a LEADER project involving second home owners. Second, several ideas for revitalization of artificial lakes (2016, 2017) were well received by the local fishermens' club, local primary schools (pupils, teachers), public institutions (municipality, LAG, Škocjan Caves Regional Park, tourist information center, scout organization) and led a few years later – with some adjustments – to a further LAG project. Third, with an interdisciplinary group of students (Uhan et al., 2017), we explored the idea of a local cooperative to be established in the Brkini region with a focus on local agricultural products. There was no direct implementation of this idea because of the local people's negative experience with cooperatives. But on the other hand, several LEADER projects supported the ideas mentioned by the students (stronger local food supply – also in public institutions, marketing of local products, farmers' markets, etc.) Fourth, there was a focus on a very tailored methodology for evaluating LAG performance (LAG Between Mt. Snežnik and Mt. Nanos), which was also echoed at the national level (Šabec, 2018). Fifth, the Department of Geography (Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana) initiated cooperation between all four municipalities and various supporting institutions (e.g., LAGs, tourist information centers, museums – Military History Park, Ecomuseum of Seasonal Lakes of Pivka, Škocjan Caves Regional Park, etc.) in the design of a map and implementation of a network of 15 cycling routes in the Brkini region and its neighbourhood (Potočnik Slavič et al., 2018; Dremel et al., 2021).

This cooperation has produced strong mutual benefits: practical learning experiences, cooperation with actors and stakeholders in rural areas, enrichment of study programmes on the academic side, while it has also empowered stakeholders and actors of the Brkini region, providing opportunities for the generation and testing of ideas, activation of the local population, a data base for the creation of the Local Development Strategy, stimulation of linking social capital, etc., and it opened the door for a flexible approach to be built into future policy design.

4.8 Reflecting by doing: the perception of the LEADER local delivery process among the project beneficiaries and LAG staff

Our respondents from 19 different LAGs (LAG Between Mt. Snežnik and Mt. Nanos included) provided several interesting insights into the implementation of LEADER in Slovenia, including examples of integration, participation and empowerment of rural areas.

⅔ strongly agreed that LEADER and LAGs stimulate rural development and focus on absorption of EU funds allocated for local development. ⅔ of respondents were familiar with projects co-financed by the LEADER programme in their LAG territory: they mentioned mainly projects in the field of tourism, promotion of local products and services, preservation and protection of natural and cultural heritage. Respondents stressed that these identified fields should continue to be supported by the LEADER programme in the future.

Integration. Half of the respondents rated the work of the lead partner as very good. A more critical attitude was voiced regarding the animation of LAG territory: 43% of respondents rated it as good, as the role of LAGs and LEADER in the local area is mostly not visible.

Participation. Half strongly agreed that LEADER and LAGs stimulate cooperation between municipalities and between different target groups in rural areas. Encouragingly, 78% of respondents were willing to continue participating in the LEADER program in the future, either as project leaders or project partners, as participants in activities (training, workshops) or as part of the management of LAG.

Empowerment. More than half strongly agreed that LAG projects have an impact on the recognisability of local products and services and strengthen local identity. More than 40% of respondents strongly agreed that LAG projects have already had a real impact on the local territory and local people, they have contributed to social inclusion and intergenerational cooperation. They felt that the projects would have a long-term impact on their LAG territories.

It is very important to note that our respondents also expressed a critical view on the role of LEADER and LAGs (documented with the quotes below – belonging to our respondents).

- Referring to the role of LEADER and LAGs in local or rural development.

"LAG covers only a small, i.e., project-based, part of rural development. LAG does not provide the whole picture. The National Rural Development Programme is much more comprehensive."

"For reasonable development, LEADER funds are either too small or the EU co-financing share is too modest."

"LAGs can't really stimulate cooperation between municipalities since they lack political power."

- Addressing the participation of local clubs/associations/societies in the LEADER programme.

"The requirements for project applications and implementation are not realistic in terms of local societies/clubs/associations, which are thereby excluded as beneficiaries."

"Due to all the excessive administrative requirements and rules, as the beneficiary has to contribute almost 50% to the investment, and due to strict controls, several local institutions (clubs/associations/societies) are not able to use LEADER funds. Local clubs/associations/societies are not able to invest in local development as only local municipalities or other stronger institutions with higher financial capacity and other resources are able to make financial pre-investment."

5. Conclusions

The Brkini region, a typical example of a structurally weak or lagging region, has experienced a mix of exogenous (mainly investment in basic infrastructure) and neo-endogenous investments (national rural development policy from 1990 to 2006, and LEADER implementation since 2007). Our research sought to find out whether the LEADER local delivery process (via projects implemented over the two programming periods: 2007–2013 and 2014–2020) has contributed to the empowerment of rural regions.

It should be noted that the implementation of LEADER in the Brkini region has been affected by an asymmetry between statutory LEADER boundaries (bifurcation of the Brkini region at municipal, regional and supra-regional levels) and the locally identified space. This has implications for LEADER implementation and outcomes, but the fragmentation of the Brkini region between two LAGs has been overcome to some extent through collaboration projects between (neighbouring) LAGs.

Through the analysis of actors, actions, institutions and teritories involved in the LEADER local delivery process, we tried to find out whether active, mutual, organizational and experiental learning empowered the Brkini region (its society and space). The evidence indicates that the Brkini region was quite successful in *integrating* different actors and sectors in joint projects, establishing cooperation between stakeholders and making quite good use of the pre- LEADER experience provided by the national rural development policy. A detailed analysis of the implemented LEADER projects in the Brkini region showed that *participation,* which is a steppingstone towards empowerment, has emerged in the following areas.

(1) A tangible networking impact has been driven by the principles and regulations of LEADER: visible in the cooperation and networking between existing and new actors and stakeholders at local and sub-regional level.

(2) The LEADER programme introduced important investments which are reflected in tangible spatial impacts. Previously, municipalities invested mainly in basic infrastructure (roads, municipal infrastructure, electricity supply, broadband), but LEADER funds aremore commonly allocated to "smaller projects" and networking within the region.

(3) LEADER fits in with existing local aspirations as it supports several areas of the multi-sectoral approach, with particular emphasis on tourism promotion and agricultural production and processing.

(4) Tangible territorial impacts are demonstrated through locally designed interventions: the Brkini region is promoted and has gained recognition at sub-regional, regional, national and cross-border levels.

Nevertheless, in the context of *empowerment*, while we were able to identify some positive signs, we also revealed some bottlenecks.

The long-lasting demographic erosion is seen in the lack of capacity to establish institutions in the Brkini region: embedded institutional power is needed for empowerment, or the region will always follow the development generated by centres outside the region. There are active community organisations in the form of local clubs/societies/associations, but they lack institutional, administrative and financial capacity. Since there is a long tradition of local knowledge related to fruit production and processing, a specialised institution or laboratory should be located in the Brkini region. In the area of fruit marketing, stimulation for locally based enterprises could help to strengthen actors, actions and institutions.

Compared to our previous research (Potočnik Slavič, 2008, 2010), after two LEADER programming periods, we can argue quantitatively and qualitatively that the Brkini region has developed "multiple cells of empowerment" capable of activating endogenous potentials. But it is too early to judge whether a long-term oriented, stable, flexible network has been established that uses local skills, knowledge, competences and self-confidence. We want to observe whether the existing partnerships and areas of cooperation will be further developed in the next programming period 2021–27.

Projects bring together multiple actors and stakeholders, they enable formalised and non-formalised collaboration and networking. Actors and institutions learn actively and from each other, they gain organisational experience and acquire skills and competences through experiential learning. Looking at

the implementation of LEADER in the Brkini region and also in other LEADER territories in Slovenia, we would argue there is a lack in reflexive (neo-endogenous) thinking about the impact of LEADER among local people and stakeholders. Mostly, their thinking is limited to the project mentality.

"... a project starts and ends, then a new project starts and ends – we are always in a hurry and never really take time to reflect – what we have learned from each other, what should be elaborated in the following years, what did not work..." (E-survey of LAG's staff, 2020)

In line with neo-endogenous thinking, these contributions highlight that reflection does not only occur within the self, or within particular actors, but also requires actors to continuously seek feedback, to understand other actors' experiences, and to question attitudes and accepted behaviours. It is in fact a combination of such experiences that both constitute and produce reflexivity (Gkartzios and Lowe, 2019). There are several ways to promote reflexivity within neo-endogenous thinking:

- including research-practice rural development networks: as established by the Department of Geography, University of Ljubljana and stakeholders in the Brkini region; lately, several LAGs in Slovenia have started to cooperate more with academic institutions;
- interdisciplinary methodological synergies between different social scientists, and also between natural and social scientists working in rural development contexts: some sporadic examples are registered with nationally financed research projects, but a detailed analysis of LEADER local delivery processes has not been undertaken;
- international comparative research: it is important not only for the transfer of knowledge or lesson sharing as it is commonly argued, but, more critically, because it mirrors and challenges one's own assumptions about the development process (Gkartzios and Lowe, 2019).

Decision-makers should pay special attention to this when preparing new animation strategies for the next programming period. But they should also promote a culture of reflexivity and power sharing. The above indicated ways are all networked approaches, they require collaboration with multiple actors who may hold different forms of knowldge. Decision-makers should emphasise the need for continuous co-creation of knowledge, exchange and critical discourse on what is and how to do rural development (Gkartzios and Lowe, 2019).

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank several generations of geography students for sharing rural experiences, and especially to all institutions and inhabitants of the Brkini region.

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