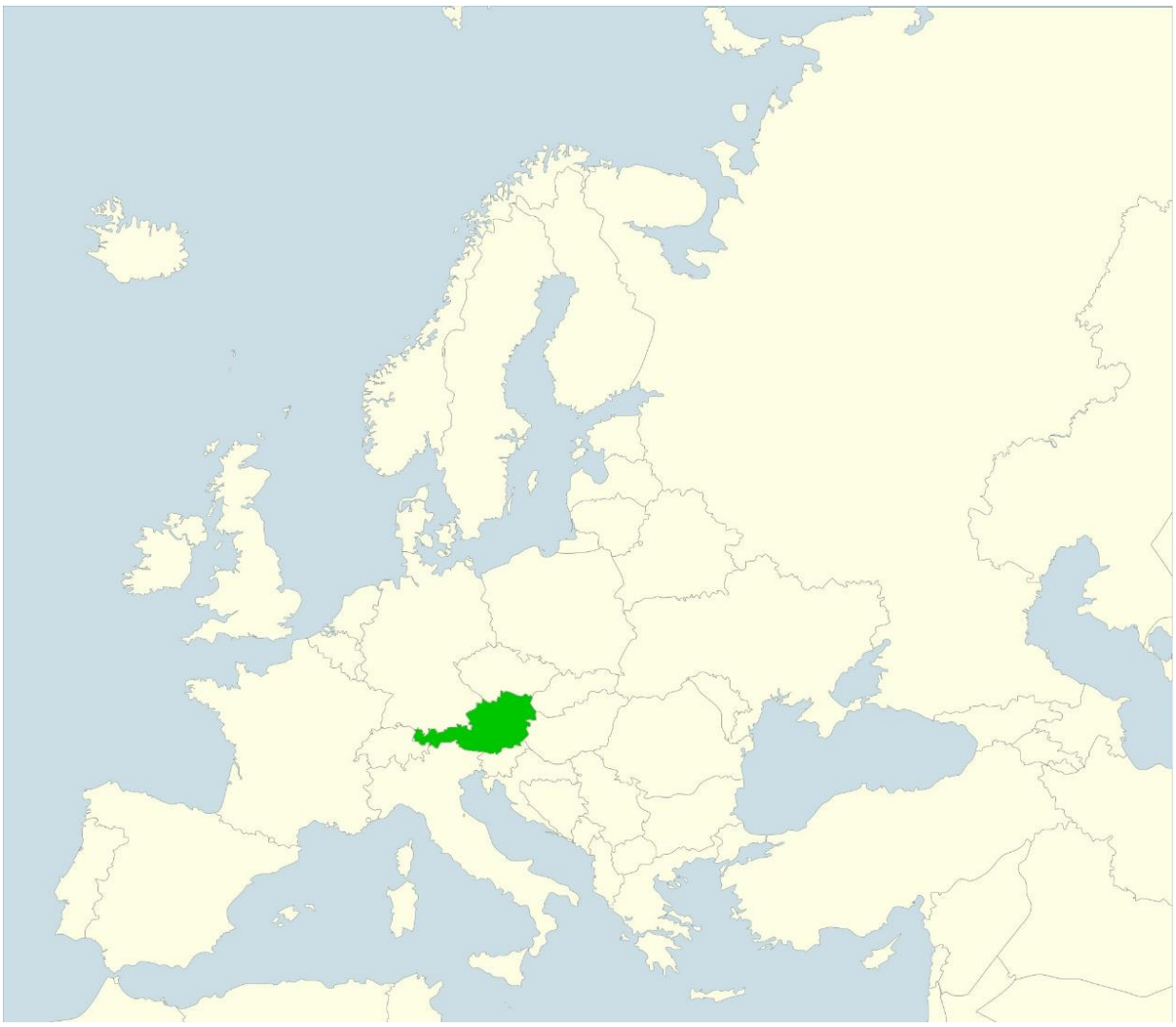
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ASSESSING THE POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL INNOVATION AND LOCAL AGENDA-SETTING WITHIN RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES: INSIGHTS FROM AUSTRIAN LEADER REGIONS

Sune Wiingaard Stoustrup[1]





[1] Sune Wiingaard Stoustrup, PhD candidate, Faculty VI: Planning Building Environment, Technical University Berlin. E- mail: sune.w.stoustrup@gmail.com; ORCID: 0000-0001-8237-6383

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Abstract: Since the beginning of the 1990s, the LEADER programme has been implemented to promote positive development in rural areas in the EU through bottom-up approaches and community engagement. Lately, concerns have been raised about the capability of LEADER to foster social innovation and provide adequate room to manoeuvre for communities to set agendas locally. This paper attempts to engage in this discussion by analysing the implementation of rural development programmes, local ideas and experiences with LEADER and social innovation in four LEADER regions in Upper Austria (AT). Furthermore, the analysis outlines the projects implemented through LEADER to evaluate the possibilities for local agenda-setting. The research shows both the success of LEADER as a tool to instigate bottom-up and neo-endogenous development and the need for additional institutional frameworks for community consultations if inclusive and forward-looking visions of rural development are to be fostered.

Keywords: Austria, LEADER programme, neo-endogenous rural development, social innovation

Highlights:

- A tension between bottom-up initiatives and top-down structures in rural development
- Need for manoeuvre to foster social innovation in neo-endogenous development
- The LEADER period 2014–2020 has seen the return of implementation of innovative projects
- LEADER shows tension between short-term projects and long-term perspectives
- LEADER could depend on external sources to foster social innovation and local agenda-setting

1. Introduction

A proposed solution to rural decline, both within European policy and academic discourse, is "social innovation" (Bock 2016; Ney 2014; See also Bureau of European Policy Advisers 2010; European Commission 2013). Although "social innovation" is a contested and "fuzzy" buzzword encompassing a range of approaches, the most common constituent is the idea of social innovation "as a motor of change rooted in social collaboration and social learning, the response to unmet social needs as a desirable outcome, and society as the arena in which change should take place" (Bock 2016: 4). The process of social innovation in rural areas is linked to the local identification of a need to change behaviour, perceptions or attitudes together with the development and acceptance of new discourses propagating new ideas and practices, which together engage society in the development of new solutions (see Christmann 2016; Neumeier 2012; Neumeier 2017; Bock 2012). For social innovation to succeed in addressing community interests and creating an inclusive and forward-looking vision of sustainable rural development, there is both the need for the creation and transformation of social relations locally to develop new ways of working together and for a wider environment of governance relationship at multiple scales, which is adaptive to processes of change (Castro-Arce and Vanclay 2020; Copus et al. 2011). This increased interest among policymakers on the European and national levels has "changed the approach to and the object of local social innovation from a bottom-up form of social action into a top-down policy instrument" (Oosterlynck, Novy and Kazepov 2020: 218). Rather than being a source for genuine social policy renewal, the provision of resources and support for social innovation might have "created a space for 'constrained' innovation", whereby social innovation might be repositioned as only an extension of macro-level warfare policies and the EU's social investment agenda (Oosterlynck, Novy and Kazepov 2020: 218).

This paper, therefore, attempts to reveal possible relationships between what Moulaert and Nussbaumer (2005: 2071) call "institutional innovation (innovation in social relations, innovations in governance including empowerment dynamics) and innovation in the sense of the social economy" and thus examine

in what way rural development programmes can act as a "catalyst for, and encourage the development of, sustainable [social] innovations" (Dax et al. 2016: 57). It does so empirically by studying four LEADER regions in Upper Austria (AT) via an analysis of the: 1) Institutional frameworks for rural development are implemented locally. 2) The local discourses in terms of changing ideas and perceptions of innovative approaches. 3) The projects implemented in the LEADER funding periods 2007–2013 and 2014–2020.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 introduces rural development from a European perspective, focusing on how social innovation is enclosed within this. Section 3 presents the case study, research design and methodology. Section 4 gives a brief overview of rural development in Austria and Upper Austria. In Section 5, an outline of the local development in the four case regions is presented. Section 6 presents the project implementation in the LEADER periods 2007–2013 and 2014–2020; and links these to the ideas and governance systems in the individual regions. Finally, section 7 discusses the findings, followed by some concluding remarks in section 8.

2. European Rural Development and Planning

Spatial planning has experienced a general shift of principles from the government to governance, which entailed a retreat of hierarchical top-down, command-and-control intervention, and replaced this with planning in terms of steering or coordinating and involvement of multiple actors, spatial scales and institutions (Brenner 2004) that coordinate activities across economic, environmental and social dimensions (Scott, Gallent and Gkartzios 2019a). A central development is the elevation of informal governance instruments at both national and supra-national levels with partnerships, networks and the development of temporary projects as tools to achieve political aims. In particular, the EU regional development policies rely on initiating partnerships to implement local projects. The partnership model builds on the rationality that while the government in modern society is still responsible, it is less capable of acting alone and therefore needs strong horizontal as well as vertical interlinking mechanisms (Sjöblom and Godenhjelm 2009). It is defined by increasingly locally-led approaches combining local resources and local participation with interactions and learning from their wider environments (Bosworth et al. 2016; see also Bock 2019). In doing so, suitable organisational structures and institutional capacity are necessary to allow for the conceptualisation and development of innovative projects, especially with regard to those fostered by external factors or sources such as rural development programmes (Dax et al. 2016). These should be seen as a specific form of strategic spatial planning implemented to alleviate, for example, rural decline (i.e., outmigration, lack of jobs and public amenities) by fostering the "collectively re-imagining the possible futures" (Oosterlynck, Albrechts and Van den Broeck 2010: 1), which is "institutionalised, embedded in norms, in ways of doing things, attitudes and practices, and provide a basis for structural change" (Albrechts 2010: 21). Concerning rural development, rural residents are reframed as "responsible for their own welfare" (Kumpulainen 2016: 58; see also Stoustrup 2021) through policies propagating the creation of community identities and the encouragement to themselves to ensure local activities and maintain vital services (Kumpulainen 2017; Bock 2019).

In the EU, the LEADER programme (French acronym for Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale) is the European Commission's primary tool for initiating local action to promote positive rural development in its member countries, and it is now the principal foundation for European rural development (Scott, Gallent and Gkartzios 2019b: 13). Since the 1990s, the LEADER programme has promoted neo-endogenous development (see Bosworth et al. 2016) through a governance system fostering community empowerment and territorial, integrated bottom-up approaches supported by knowledge sharing, external expertise and financial support schemes, characterised by a mix of informal activism and formalised local planning processes (Gallent and Gkartzios 2019). It works primarily by supporting the instigation of local village associations and action groups, which then develop local strategies and projects. Local action groups (LAGs) work with a substantial degree of flexibility in implementing projects and initiatives at a local level. The participation of the local level actors means that the actions are founded on community-based strategies (Lapping and Scott 2019), with the proposed strength of the LEADER approach being that the decisions are made by actors familiar with local needs (Pollerman 2014). Taken together, this puts social innovation and local capacity building at the core of

neo-endogenous rural development and LEADER (Dax and Oedl-Wieser 2016; see also Novikova 2021 for a comparison of neo-endogenous development and social innovation).

One crucial dimension of fostering social innovation toward alleviating rural marginalisation (Bock 2016) is creating and sustaining collective learning cultures that foster the rethinking of social and spatial solidarity. Thus, rural development frameworks need to provide adequate room to manoeuvre (Neumeier 2012; Neumeier 2017; Castro-Arcea and Vanclaya 2020; Novikova 2021) to allow local actors to set the agenda with local ideas drawn from a diverse range of sources and approaches (Biggs, Westley and Carpenter 2010). Although the LEADER approach has meant that many local initiatives have received support to "promote 'integrated, high-quality and original strategies for sustainable development" (Gallent and Gkartzios 2019: 25), the programme has also been the target of criticism for being "a change more of style than of substance" (Navarro, Woods and Cejudo 2015: 16; see also Bosworth et al. 2016 for a more comprehensive review). Also, LEADER is comprised of both top-down and bottom-up elements, and although top-down control may be necessary from an overall programme delivery perspective, it can limit opportunities for LAGs to develop integrated and (socially) innovative approaches to rural development (Convery et al. 2010). For example, the standardisation of policies and programmes and initiatives has constructed a specific discursive space encompassing certain particular ways of approaching rural development (Woods 2013) through the "transfer of *specific* actions and/or ideas into the 'mainstream' of policy administration and general programme application" (Dax et al.,2016: 58; emphasis in original).

With the foremost impetus for initiating rural development schemes locally being the availability of project funding, local communities need to negotiate between local needs and ideas, and specific rationalities, norms and objectives of the rural policy defining how communities should develop themselves *(*Kumpulainen 2016; 2017: 616). The implementation of EU's LEADER programme does not only provide a catalyst to initiate the founding of local development associations but also influences "the nature of the initiatives: the definition of their boundaries, types of organisation and styles of projects" (Ray 1997: 358: see also Stoustrup 2021). For example, studies from Austria and Ireland have indicated that in the funding period 2007–2013, LEADER lost some of the prerequisites for success that defined its initial implementation due to a growing agricultural orientation in its application and less concentration on innovative cooperation projects (Dax et al. 2016: 64). Likewise, Convery et al. (2010) find these sentiments expressed among LAG stakeholders in Cumbria, who stated that the programme is not anymore about local needs but is steered by top-down prescriptions from the EU, national government and regional management, where an expanded focus on agriculture and forestry has meant a lack of flexibility locally to integrate social and economic elements. The programme's foundation of endogenous and socio-economic development (Ray 2000) seems to have become constrained by a growing set of regulations and specific political-administrative discourses. In this tension between bottom-up initiatives and top-down structures (Castro-Arcea and Vanclay 2020), LEADER implementation can come to act as a conservative force moderating more radical rural ideas, with the consequence that the potential for social innovation and local agenda-setting regarding project development is reduced (see Chatzichristos and Nagopoulos 2020; Convery et al. 2010; Dargan and Shucksmith 2008; van der Ploeg et al. 2000;).

If social innovations originate from the intentional reconfigurations of actor constellations and social practices at the interfaces between different social contexts and rationalities for solving problems (Schwarz et al. 2010: 174), this highlights the possible tension between local and external rationalities regarding how to solve problems and satisfy needs (see also Noack and Federwisch 2019) through short-term (projects) locally and the development of long-term perspectives (strategies or visions). As Domanski, Howaldt and Kaletka (2020) point out, there is a need to understand the impact and importance of the social innovation "ecosystems" and "infrastructures", which act as frameworks providing interfaces and institutional spaces for collaboration and the development of problem-solving capacities (see also Stoustrup 2022). Although considerable academic work has been done to understand new governance processes, the temporal dimension of these changes, especially regarding securing long-term societal needs on a project-by-project basis, has so far been neglected (Godenhjelm, Lundin and Sjöblom 2015).

3. Case Study, Research Design and Methodology

To understand the changes in local development, the research design analyses four different LEADER regions in the region of Mühlviertel in the province of Upper Austria (see Fig. 1). All four regions have been very active and fostered many projects through LEADER, but also show differences in their local development frameworks. By actors in the province, LEADER is seen as a tool that allows communities to take responsibility for the development of their local area rather than wait for the government to provide solutions. It is seen as functioning through creating regional identities, bringing the residents' ideas to realisation, and bringing new impulses and funding to the area. Regional management bodies on the level of Mühlviertel and Upper Austria play key parts in supporting the LAGs with accessing funding schemes and development programmes. Although the LAGs experience some attempts of top-down steering or rigid requirements to initiate topics, LEADER is generally perceived as offering a flexible framework for local agenda-setting. However, the kind of LEADER projects the provincial government approves of is not always clear to local actors. The relationship between the LAGs in Mühlviertel is characterised by good cooperation, regular meetings and knowledge sharing.

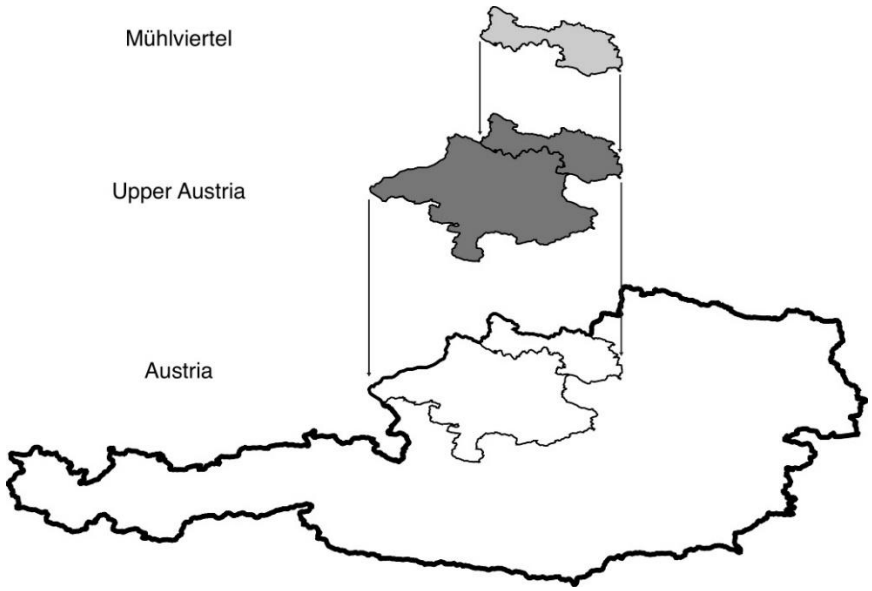


Fig 1. Austria with the location of the province of Upper Austria and the region of Mühlviertel shown. Source:Author

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3.1 Local Agenda 21

In the province of Upper Austria, separately from LEADER, the community consultation tool Local Agenda 21 (LA21) is also implemented. Inspired by the Rio Declaration, the government of Upper Austria developed a new sustainability strategy between 1992–1995. From 1998 onwards, LA21 was

implemented to develop the state in a systemic, holistic way and integrate both the local and regional levels. On the national level, coordinated steps to promote LA21 were mainly taken after the 1997 United Nations General Assembly Special Session (Called UNGASS or Rio +5); and eventually, LA21 was introduced as a tool at the national level in 2002 with the result that more communities implemented the process in the following years (see Narodoslawsky and Grabher 2001; Feichtinger and Pregernig 2005). LA21 is an example of social innovation which explicitly promotes collective action for sustainable development through the inclusion of local communities in planning and decision-making and "collective searches for alternative ways to mobilise local resources" and "links economic development to an agenda of social equity" (Baker and Mehmood 2015: 8–9). The output of local LA21 processes is a so-called "future profile", which sets a vision for the local development goals and aims for the next ten years. These are not "step-by-step action plans" but mainly principles regarding which values and priorities the community should develop towards. The aim of LA21 should therefore be seen as a tool for local capacity building and the instigation of new local discourses necessary to instigate social innovation through the inherent aim of fostering new attitudes, behaviours and perceptions (see Christmann 2016; Neumeier 2012; Neumeier 2017). In the analysis, the implementation of LA21 in the regions is used as a proxy variable to gauge the emergence of local discourses and discussions locally regarding the future of the region, which is crucial for instigating local actions and innovative approaches (see Christmann 2016; see Stoustrup 2022 for an example of this from the case region Mühlviertel Alm).

3.2 The four case regions

The study covers the implementation of rural development in the LEADER regions of Mühlviertler Alm (MA), Perg-Strudengau (PS), Mühlviertler Kernland (MK) and Donau-Böhmerwald (DB). Mühlviertler Alm is a region with both a long history of local engagement and a framework that encompasses LEADER as well as LA21 (see Stoustrup 2022 for a more comprehensive account). The two neighbouring regions, Perg-Strudengau (PS) and Mühlviertler Kernland (MK), are both implementing LEADER but have limited engagement with LA21, and the fourth case region Donau-Böhmerwald (DB), includes both coherent LA21 regions and communities that work with the LA21 process independently (see Fig. 2 and Table 1). While the region of Mühlviertel has two other LEADER regions, the data available for these were insufficient and therefore excluded from the study. The following table gives an overview of key figures for the selected case studies.

Tab 1. Description of Case Regions. Source: Compiled by the author from Agenda 21-Netzwerk Oberösterreich (2022); LAG-Management Mühlviertler Kernland (n.d.); LAG-Management Perg-Strudengau (2021); LAG Perg-Strudengau (n.d./a); LAG Perg-Strudengau (n.d./b); LAG Verband Mühlviertler Alm (2021); Regionalverein LEADER Donau-Böhmerwald (2021); Regionalverein Mühlviertler Kernland (n.d./a); Regionalverein Mühlviertler Kernland (n.d./b); Regionalentwicklungsverein Donau-Böhmerwald (n.d./b); Verband Mühlviertler Alm (2009); Verband Mühlviertler Alm (2019a); Verband Mühlviertler Alm (2019b).

LAG	Initiation of LAG	Population (2020, approximate numbers)	Number of municipalities	Local Agenda 21	Projects LEADER period 2007–2013	Projects LEADER period 2014–2020
Mühlviertler Alm	1995	18.000	10	The whole LAG together since 2001	88	43
Perg-Strudengau	2000	60.000	24	Four municipalities (separately)	41	69
Mühlviertler Kernland	2007	45.000	17	10 municipalities (separately)	69	89
Donau-Böhmerwald	2008	58.000	(30) 38	22 municipalities (some as regions together, some individually)	76	86

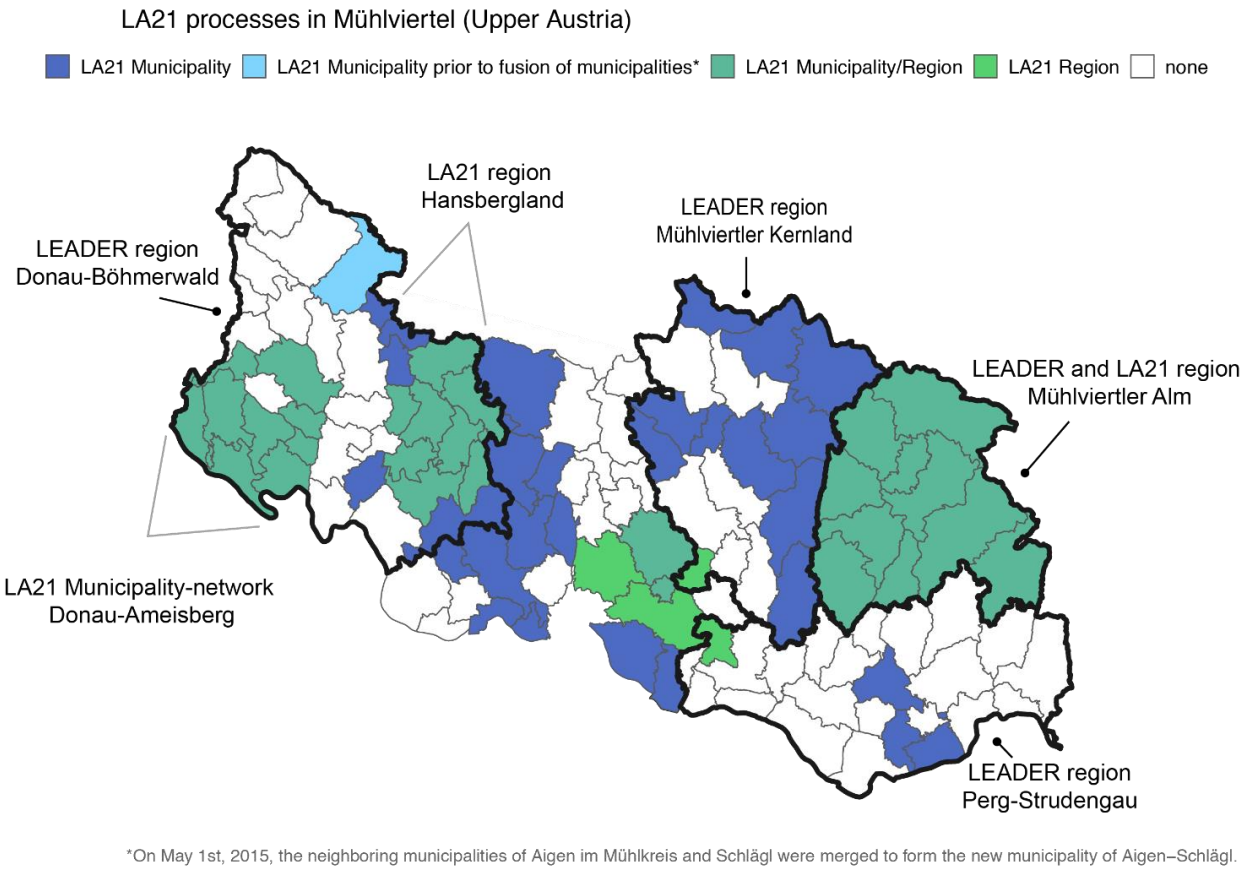


Fig 2. LA21 processes in Mühlviertel (Upper Austria). Source: Author adapted from Agenda 21-Netzwerk Oberösterreich (2022) and Land Oberösterreich (n.d.)

3.3 Research design

The data corpus consists of semi-structured interviews and field visits conducted in the Autumn of 2018 conducted within the project RurAction „Social Entrepreneurship in Structurally Weak Rural Regions – Analysing Innovative Troubleshooters in Action" as well as process-generated data (see Baur and Lahusen 2005) such as documents, websites and projects descriptions. The interviewed persons consisted of two groups: The first group (N=4) were the LAG managers from the four case studies; the second group (N=11) consisted of private and public consultants who worked with the communities, LAG managers from the two other LEADER regions in Mühlviertel, local actors (former mayors, regional politicians and active residents) as well as representatives from ELARD (the European LEADER Association for Rural Development) and the Austrian LEADER Forum (see Appendix A for a full list of interviews). While the first group provides in-depth insights into the case studies, the latter corroborates the specificities of these against the other historical and present-day developments, both in Mühlviertel and in Upper Austria. Thus, it is possible to ascertain what can be linked to local developments rather than general trends.

The interview questions concerned the challenges the regions faced, the proposed solutions, development programmes and projects implemented to address these. Furthermore, they covered the regional development practices and frameworks, the dynamics within the local development associations, and the relationship between the association and other institutions (e.g., regional development management offices, neighbouring LAGs etc.). The process-generated data were primarily descriptions of the LAGs and their projects published online on the websites of the local development associations, together with documents related to regional development (e.g., LEADER strategies) and newspaper articles covering this. A reason for using process-generated data rather than more traditional data types is that many processes change only slowly, i.e., over 10, 20 or 30 years or even on the longue durée, with past events not possible to be apprehended by observation and often inaccessible via interviews, as individuals can have difficulties giving details of long-term processes (Baur 2011: 1238). Therefore, to identify the possibility of local agenda-setting within LEADER and indicate any changing

priorities in the LAGS, together with the possible impact of LA21, the analysis compares subdivisions through periodisation (see Hergesell, Baur and Braunisch, 2020). With LEADER experiencing prominent “standardisation” in the period 2007–2013 and indications that LAGs regained autonomy in the period 2014–2020 (Dax and Oedl-Wieser 2016), these two intervals were deemed appropriate as sub-periods for the analysis.

3.4 Data analysis

Both interviews, documents and project descriptions were coded through qualitative content analysis to identify recurring categories and themes (see Mayring 2014), and for the interviews and documents, the specific discursive patterns of interpretations regarding taking action were identified (see Keller 2013; see also Stoustrup 2021), as well as any linked concepts, structures, relations and institutions (see Hergesell, Baur and Braunisch 2020). While all the projects can be seen as encompassed within the general topic of regional development, the analysis aims to identify to what degree different topics are incorporated into the local development aims.

For example, projects classified as agriculture are related to the renewal of farms and activities connected to this (slaughterhouse facilities, farm shops, herbs farming, etc.). "Social" projects are related to specific groups, for example, youth, children, the elderly or welcoming newcomers to rural areas. "Communal interests" cover projects aiming to improve local conditions, for example, community participation projects, village renewal, or public amenities (for a full overview see Table 2. in Appendix B). It should be stressed that many projects are designed to include more than one dimension. To categorise the projects in a manner that could show patterns in local project implementation, it was deemed necessary to weight the different dimensions and assign each project with only one category. For example, all tourism and agriculture projects are related to the economy, but not the other way around. Therefore, between agriculture and economy, the classification agriculture was chosen, or between economy and tourism, the latter was chosen, as this categorisation would display more about the specific nature of the project. Thus, a bakery in a village will be classified as "economy", while a "cider tavern" connected to a farm will be labelled "agriculture" (due to it adding value by refining agricultural products), and a cider tavern with guest rooms will be coded as tourism. Furthermore, the analytical interest in projects indicating a presence of local discourses on social and spatial solidarity can be hard to ascertain, as many projects incorporate multiple concerns: For example, the pump track project in St. Johann am Wimberg has goals which both tie it to "added tourism value creation" and to creating "attractive living space for young people” locally, with the underpinning rationale that "improved leisure facilities will lead to stronger regional roots" (www.donau-boehmerwald.info n.d., own translation). As such, the project was classified as a "social" project.

The categorisation should be perceived as approximate, and all responsibility for the correctness of data and the weighting and categorisation falls on the author alone. The coding process was iterative and was carried out twice by the author to ensure accuracy as well as consistency throughout the categories. From the whole data set of projects, only one project (from the Mühlviertler Alm 2007–2013 period) was excluded from the study due to an insufficient project description. After the qualitative coding process, the data was quantified by counting how many projects of each category were implemented in each period and case (see Figures 3 and 4). Furthermore, it should be noted that the analysis does not consider the difference in population for each region or that different projects vary in funding allocation. Rather than providing assertive statements, the analysis aims to present general patterns for each region to trace the implications of innovation in rural governance systems and the trajectories for regional development priorities, as represented by local discourses and project implementation.

4. A brief overview of rural development in Austria and Upper Austria

Austria has a long tradition of rural development, with especially the 1970s seeing a paradigm shift towards "bottom-up" and endogenous approaches to rural development (Gerhardter and Gruber 2001). Furthermore, the 1995 EU accession became a catalyst for regional development (ÖAR-Regionalberatung

2009; see also Stoustrup 2022 for a more comprehensive account). The implementation of the EU's LEADER programme in Austria can be described as successful, with a considerable impact on regional identity-building in many rural areas (ÖROK 2002; Oedl-Wieser, Strahl and Dax 2010). However, while the mainstreaming of LEADER from the 2007–2013 period should, in theory, provide more flexibility to select projects according to local strategies, it nonetheless saw LAGs pushed towards "standard" (i.e., less innovative) projects, focusing on low-risk agricultural projects and classical investment-measures without any innovative focus, experimental character or creativity (Oedl-Wieser, Strahl and Dax 2010; Dax et al. 2016). Moreover, the innovative character of LEADER was in this period under threat by a "banalisation" of rural development whereby LAGs were constrained by administrative prescriptions, which propagated the neglect of strategic concerns and use of local assets (Oedl-Wieser, Strahl and Dax 2010: 73; Dax and Oedl-Wieser 2016: 32).

5. The origins of the four case regions and their local governance arrangements

5.1 Mühlviertler Alm

The oldest LEADER region of the four cases is Mühlviertler Alm. It is a self-initiated regional development association and LEADER region. It grew out of a local "feeling of hopelessness and resignation among the community" (I:1 Former mayor and founder of LAG MA) due to the adverse conditions it was facing at the end of the 1980s, with few regional jobs and poor conditions for the agricultural sector (Verband Mühlviertler Alm 2009). The association was founded in 1993 to instigate a local “self-help movement” rather than "wait for help from outside" (Gradl 2003: 2; own translation) and implement the LEADER programme when Austria joined the EU in 1995. The beginning was shaped by a specific "project" rationality where "the main topic was as many projects as possible" (I:1 Former mayor and founder of LAG MA). While this was successful, it became apparent to the local actors that there was a need for a broader perspective regarding what regional development entailed, for example, the social dimension. They, therefore, started implementing LA21 in 2001 to "get an orientation on what the important topics […] are for the future" (I:2 Regional development consultant). In the LAG, it was stressed that the combination of LEADER and LA21 created fruitful synergies, with the LA21 process used to develop a vision for "where to go" and to produce topics and objectives for the LEADER strategy (I:1 Former mayor and founder LAG MA). While LEADER currently covers all of Mühlviertel and LA21 is implemented in many communities, the association of Mühlviertler Alm is particular in being the only association that participates in both as one single region (see Fig 2). Notable for the region is also its hosting of the travelling social festival "Tu was, dann tut sich was" (German approximately for "do something, then something happens"; see also Gstach 2014; Stoustrup 2022) from 2013 to 2015, which worked to "invit[e] and encourag[e] citizens to take the initiative" (Gradl 2013: 2, own translation). In the festival period, 74 projects were implemented with funding from the festival, as well as through LEADER and the province of Upper Austria. Moreover, many ideas and lessons from LA21 and "Tu was" have been integrated into the local LEADER implementation. The region is recognised for being successful (Agenda 21-Netzwerk Oberösterreich 2008) and was also in the interviews with actors from other LEADER regions known as someone to learn from. For example, when the LEADER region of Mühlviertler Kernland was initiated, they were "told by everyone to look at the Muhlviertler Alm as they have done [regional development] for many years and we should act the same. We should be as good as they are soon" (I:7 LAG MK).

5.2 Perg-Strudengau

The region of Perg-Strudengau is the second oldest LEADER region of the case regions. Before implementing LEADER, the communities in its eastern part (Strudengau) had worked together as a tourism association since the mid-1990s. When the former monastery Waldhausen im Strudengau was chosen to host the provincial cultural exhibition in 2002, the community started a restoration and preservation process of the building, which acted as an impulse for sustainable regional development in Lower Mühlviertel (OÖ. Landesausstellung 2022). With the knowledge of the upcoming event a few years in advance, the exhibition was decisive for initiating the LAG as it sparked the feeling that “the whole area should benefit from such a regional exhibition” (I:6 LAG PS). From here grew the idea to start the LEADER

region Strudengau, which has since grown into incorporating the neighbouring area of Perg. In the LAG, there was the impression that the “regional idea” has become stronger over the last decades with a change from looking only at each municipality individually to instead considering what is good for the whole region. In the LAG, there was an awareness of social innovation as a term, but besides a few projects, it was not yet an apparent concern on the local agenda. There was more focus on projects with clear and tangible results rather than on developing new ideas regarding how they could live together as a region. Although being implemented in some municipalities, LA21 is in the LAG perceived as a tool separate from LEADER. The LAG has experienced issues getting youth and women involved in the work with LEADER but is planning future strategy workshops to help alleviate this. As it can also be seen in the project distribution (see the upcoming figure 4), in the region, there has been a focus on the heritage of the region, with many projects dealing with historical remains, for example, old castles in the area and the history of the former Mauthausen concentration camp, which was located in one of the region's municipalities.

5.3 Donau-Böhmerwald and Mühlviertler Kernland

While LEADER was initially designed to make regions able to establish themselves "bottom-up" and try out experiments in rural development (as it can be seen both for Mühlviertler Alm and Perg-Strudengau), the 2007 mainstreaming of LEADER meant that large amounts of funding were made available. In Upper Austria, it was decided at the provincial level to increase the number of LEADER regions in the province, and both Donau-Böhmerwald and Mühlviertler Kernland were founded in this period. LEADER thus is relatively "new" in these regions; but, for example, the history of cooperation in the region of Donau-Böhmerwald can be traced back to 1991, when it was one of the first to draw up a regional energy concept and was developed into a "Climate and Energy Model Region" to showcase how to secure a sustainable energy future (Regionalverein LEADER Donau-Böhmerwald 2021). Furthermore, for the period 2014–2020, it was decided to merge the LAG HansBergLand into the larger LAG Donau-Böhmerwald. The association HansBergLand was founded at the beginning of 2004 among 11 municipalities. In 2007, it successfully applied to be a LEADER region. The LAG of HansBergLand was very active in initiating new impulses for local development and realised several joint projects as well as implemented LA21 in the region. With the merger, the experiences made there could be integrated into the now larger region. Furthermore, since 2012, eight municipalities have worked together in the LA21 network Donau-Ameisberg. Similarly to the LAG Perg-Strudengau, the LAG Donau-Böhmerwald lacked an “emotional“ connection to the regional development work in the first period but saw this change after they participated in the EU-funded project “GLAMURS“ (Glamurs 2015). Through participation in the project, they became aware of their strengths as they were able to “detect our way of living and what is our lifestyle in our area and our culture and our common culture in the region as organism or organisation” (I:8 LAG DB). Furthermore, many communities in the region have implemented LA21 processes. In these, new topic areas were developed regarding the future needs of their region, and LA21 also became included in the region's LEADER strategy. The ideas developed within LA21 and GLAMURS moreover fostered the self-initiated project “Voi Lebm” (German – in dialect – for approximately “living to the fullest”), for which they acquired LEADER funding. In the LAG, there is a clear idea about social innovation, both when it comes to experimentation and cooperation, for example, creating new products or services. Furthermore, there is now an impetus from local mayors to develop structures to think about the future:

“to think not only about administration and new regulations that come from the district administration, but we also need some room for thinking about our own perspectives and development in our region. So we now try to do that in LEADER – to give some space for rethinking the region” (I:8 LAG DB).

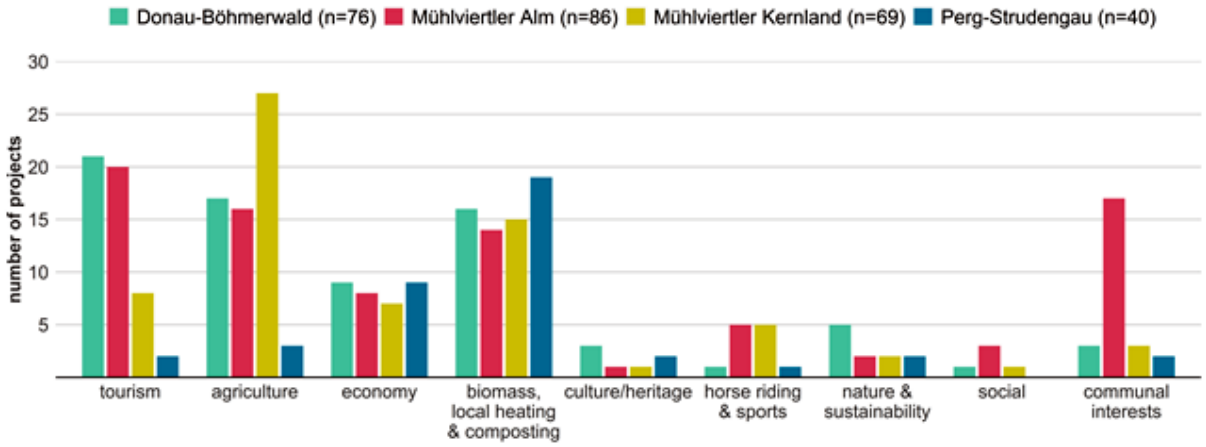


Fig 3. Number of LEADER projects by focus and regions 2007–2013, with "n" being the total number of projects by the LAG in the period. Source: Author, compiled from LAG Perg-Strudengau (n.d./a); Regionalentwicklungsverein Donau-Böhmerwald (n.d./b); Regionalverein Mühlviertler Kernland (n.d./a); Verband Mühlviertler Alm (2019a).

In Mühlviertler Kernland, social projects are seen as a central theme, for example, making the region barrier-free, and thus a good region to live in for all generations, within a frame of "The future of living for the next generation". Here the LAG "invites people to tell us which ideas they have, regarding the possibility to build new forms of living together: old and young, and also handicapped people" (I:7 LAG MK). As mentioned earlier, Mühlviertler Kernland explicitly learned from Mühlviertler Alm to find its approach to local development. While not to the same extent being involved in LA21 as a region, the LAG shows a clear interest in advancing new approaches to local development, and LA21 is also included in their LEADER strategy document. Furthermore, there is a focus on extensive community participation processes for their strategy development. In the LAG, social innovation is seen as key to "the empowerment of living together in a social and healthy way" (I:7 LAG MK). Moreover, there is the idea to work towards more autonomy in their regional development work, so they don't have to only rely on LEADER and other government programs. For example, the Think Tank Region festival (see Regionalverein Mühlviertler Kernland n.d./c) was developed to learn from both local and external actors and get inspiration and new ideas for how to develop in the future.

6. Assessing the impact of social innovation on LEADER project implementation in the funding periods 2007–2013 and 2014–2020

Looking at the distribution in the four regions for the period 2007–2013 (Figure 3), it is clear that in the selected case studies, the period was dominated by "traditional" LEADER projects, focusing on tourism, agriculture, economy and biomass, local heating and composting. The lack of project variety attests to the earlier mentioned standardisation and banalisation of rural development; however, two outliers are discernible: 1) the lack of tourism and agriculture projects in the region of Perg-Strudengau, and 2) the engagement with communal interests in Mühlviertler Alm. Regarding the first point, while the lack of these types of projects in Perg-Strudengau could at a glance be attributed to a lack of interest or need for these projects locally, it is clear from the project distribution in the following period that this is not the case (see figure 4). Regarding the second point, it seems evident that the local holistic discourse embraced in Mühlviertler Alm profoundly impacted the projects carried out in the region. For this period, the two newest LEADER regions experienced issues instigating local development. Here, LAG Mühlviertler Kernland saw the need to instigate project development top-down, and in LAG Donau-Böhmerwald, the "common culture and common feeling in the region" had not yet been built. While they carried out many projects, "it was municipal heating systems and lots of investments and money, but no feeling came out of it" (I:8 LAG DB). These experiences mirrored the experiences made in Mühlviertler Alm in the years following its initiation. Here the initial period was characterised by a focus on just carrying out as many projects as possible. Although successful, it only led to residents working on their individual projects without a cohesive regional approach Stoustrup 2022).

As can be seen in the possibility for Mühlviertler Alm to implement projects aimed at communal interests**,** this type was possible in the period. Thus, it was not per se only institutional or regulative barriers in LEADER that were decisive for the lack of social or communal interests projects. Instead, it indicates that the general *discursive* system of common or social meanings, either on the local or regional level, inhibited this type of project in all regions but Mühlviertler Alm, as well as the lack of tourism and agriculture projects in Perg-Strudengau. When comparing the variables between the four case studies, Mühlviertler Alm stands out concerning seniority (i.e., compared to Mühlviertler Kernland and Donau-Böhmerwald), the implementation of LA21 and change in perception regarding local development (i.e., compared to the second oldest region of Perg-Strudengau). The cause for the particular project distribution can therefore reasonably be allocated to the combination of institutional innovation (i.e., the inclusion of LA21 and focus on a regional approach) and particular local social orientation in the local development aims, which together can "breakthrough" the dominant project rationality inherent in the LEADER period 2007–2013.

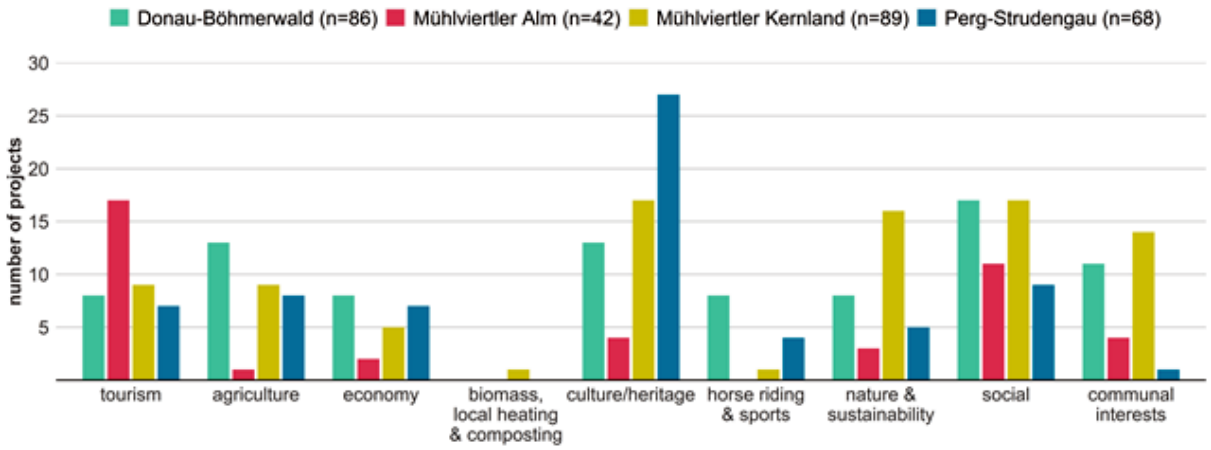


Fig 4. Number of LEADER projects by focus and regions 2014–2020, with "n" being the total number of projects by the LAG in the period. Source: Author, compiled from LAG Perg-Strudengau (n.d./b); Regionalentwicklungsverein Donau-Böhmerwald (n.d./b); Regionalverein Mühlviertler Kernland (n.d./b); Verband Mühlviertler Alm (2019b).

The LEADER period 2014–2020 saw a greater variety in project topics and variation between the different regions. Taken together, this displays 1) a widening of development goals away from the "banalisation" of rural development dominating the former period, and 2) that agenda setting to a larger extent could take place locally. However, it should be noted that, for example, municipal heating systems are still implemented but can now find funding within national programmes. Also, it is clear from the distribution of projects that "standard" projects are still seen as important for local development. This was also underlined in the interviews. For example, Mühlviertler Alm continuously focuses on further developing its flagship project, the hiking and riding trail network Johannes Weg, and has implemented many projects to augment this further. Another example is how the safekeeping of local farms is still an important topic in Donau-Böhmerwald, as the agriculture sector has seen further intensification with fewer farmers working the land. Similarly, the region still focuses on hiking trails and other leisure-related projects. However, while before they had been supported through LEADER with the aim of increased tourism, they are now also seen as an opportunity to develop amenities for the local residents.

Viewing the project distribution and taking into account its smaller size and the additional projects made within the Tu was festival, it is clear that Mühlviertler Alm is an outlier incorporating social and communal interests in both periods. In the second period, the other three regions also changed paths but to a different extent. In Donau-Böhmerwald and Mühlviertler Kernland, there is an apparent increase in projects with a social dimension or communal interests as the main topic. In contrast, in Perg-Strudengau, the number of projects is lower in these groups, and the region instead implemented a larger number of "culture and heritage" projects. The variance in project implementations between the LAGs thus clearly indicates local development steered by different perspectives. While all four cases stressed the importance of continuous outreach to the communities to spur bottom-up development by asking

questions like “what could we change in our region?”; by examining the local discourses and perceptions in the case regions as well as the level of engagement with LA21 in table 1., and comparing them with the variance in projects (figure 3 and 4), a pattern is discernible. As in the period 2007–2013., the implementation of LA21 correlates with the instigation of projects incorporating social and communal interests. While the practice of the whole region encompassed within one single consultation process (i.e., as it takes place in Mühlviertler Alm) is not the prevailing practice, the accounts from LAG Donau-Böhmerwald and Mühlviertler Kernland imply it is a key influence. The sharing of knowledge and experiences, as also a core tenet of LEADER, thus facilitated a learning process *within* the LEADER region framework where, for example, the experiences with LA21 from HansBergLand and Mühlviertler Alm appear crucial from the developments in Donau-Böhmerwald and Mühlviertler Kernland. The findings of the study suggest that the project implementation of LEADER locally was contingent on the many factors and processes external to the programme.

7. Discussion

Firstly, it should be stressed that this analysis does not judge the way the regions are developed or the projects they implement. Rather, it aims to provide an assessment of the possibility for local agenda-setting within LEADER and the room for social innovation within this framework. While all four case studies are developing differently, based on the fieldwork and analysis, they should all be considered successful in instigating bottom-up rural development and fostering an active local population in project development. Secondly, while the worries aired by Dax et al. (2016) regarding the diminished possibilities for local innovation in the LEADER period 2007–2013 are also clearly discernible in the four cases, the analysis indicates that this issue was alleviated in the following period. While the first period analysed showed apparent similarity in projects between the regions, the second period saw greater variety in the projects implemented and thus indicates the possibility for local agenda-setting within LEADER. Remarkably, the broadening of projects to include social and communal interests indicates that new concerns have emerged within many rural communities, especially when given the institutional space for engaging local residents in consultations. Although the development of regional strategies required to get certified as a LEADER region could be seen as incorporating a space to address this, it seems clear that many communities find this inadequate, and there seems to be a growing perception that frameworks supplementing LEADER are needed to develop new ideas. For example, the engagement with LA21 and Tu was as well as the development of Voi Lebm or Think Tank Region.

As the study was limited to a single national and regional context, the question arises to what extent these findings are generalisable. While the evaluation of the LEADER period 2014–2020 is still in its infancy, in many ways, the findings relate to other studies on social innovation and the implementation of LEADER in general. For example, Pollermann et al. (2020) found in their study of LEADER implementation in France, Germany and Italy that the design of rural development programmes influenced to which extent local actors from different spheres of society get involved in local development. Similarly, Navarro, Woods and Cejudo (2015), in their studies in Wales and Andalusia, find that groups lacking formal organisation or capacity to articulate their needs were inhibited from participating in LEADER implementation. They advance that unless a common culture for community participation is in place, local LEADER implementation will be characterised by a democratic deficit (Navarro, Woods and Cejudo 2015: 13). Thus, although LEADER is conceptualised as an inclusive methodology, when LAGs do not work to increase the capacity of the whole community to participate, or when the quality of participation in terms of the autonomy is limited, project types are predominantly decided top-down with an emphasis on economic development (Navarro, Woods and Cejudo 2015: 13). Likewise, from their Portuguese case study, Chatzichristos and Nagopoulos (2021) show that the lack of local culture for collaboration and weak inter-connections within the broader governance framework foster path-dependency and restrict the LAGs’ capacity for socially innovative planning and local empowerment. Chevalier et al. (2017), building on studies in Lithuania and France, propose that the local capacities for action depend on a LAG's cumulative experience, both regarding its age and the diversity of local development mechanisms.

From the analysis presented in this paper, social innovation, meaning the change in social relations, development paths and local agenda-setting, is particularly made possible by changes in the provincial

institutions (i.e., the implementation of LA21) and learning processes in and in between the individual LAGs in the region. Furthermore, the presented analysis illustrates how local development is constituted by an evolving bricolage of frameworks instigated both regionally and locally, with a clear difference between regions. These findings echo the call by Dax et al. (2016: 66) to recognise the ramification of LEADER execution for fostering interregional networks and cooperation between LEADER and other local and regional actions and mechanisms to exploit local potential in rural regions. While LEADER is also founded on the principles of fostering learning processes among people, organisations and institutions at different levels and the cooperation among LEADER groups, as Bumbalová et al. (2016: 172) find in Slovakia, the relationship between LAGs can also be of a competitive, rather than cooperative, nature. While there have been extensive discussions in planning studies towards identifying the appropriate *spatial scale* for policy action to address socio-spatial issues through the reconfiguration of decision-making arrangements (see Servillo 2019), the analysis presented in this paper makes salient questions about the adequate governance frame for fostering social innovation and instigating positive development in rural areas through bottom-up approaches. Therefore, if policymakers aim to make rural development programmes catalysts for local development, they should shift their focus from local residents and expand it to innovation in the institutional framework fostering local participation. Here the regional governance systems must provide space (and willingness) for adaptation as local perception changes regarding what is needed for regional development (see Castro-Arce and Vanclay 2020).

8. Concluding remarks

The case study findings from Austria regarding the impact of social innovation within and on the implementation of LEADER show the emergence and spread of social innovation within regional ecosystems is not only provided by factors external to the community from supra-local levels (e.g., provincial or regional level development offices) but also provided within the LAGs. As local actors perceive the need for innovation in the local development framework towards providing adequate infrastructure for social innovation and local action (see Garcia, Eizaguirre and Pradel 2010), LEADER seems lacking. Although it facilitates an environment where residents can find impetus for developing a local, territorial identity and tools for taking up action, the findings propagate renewed attention on the need for institutional infrastructure wherein communities can develop their own agenda and identify the resources and opportunities necessary for successful neo-endogenous development (see De Rubertis 2020; Esparcia and Abbasi 2020). Furthermore, the capacity for social innovation locally and regionally should be seen as processual and significantly impacted by having time to develop through local experiences fostering adaptations to the local governance system (see also Stoustrup 2022). Here, the presented research shows the importance of creating and sustaining collective learning cultures within and between regions. This brings this article back to the tension between short-term (projects) and long-term perspectives (strategies or visions).

Especially regarding the characteristics of projects implemented through public funding in rural areas (this including LEADER), some concerns can, and should, be raised. Cañete, Navarro and Cejudo (2018) point to how many LEADER projects could be seen as outside the “main purposes of the LEADER Initiative”. For example, rather than being engaged in what they define as the core of LEADER, namely the creation of jobs through economic development (e.g., the improvement of production structures, access to innovation and business diversification), local objectives are “aimed more at improving local facilities and infrastructures and in the case of the LAGs at administrative and publicity work“ (Cañete, Navarro and Cejudo 2018: 7–8). Although they consent that the use of these funds could be justified in the way that these project types provide impetus to the revitalisation of rural areas by improving the quality of life, this funding practice might also mask a lack of investment by other public administrations, regarding meeting local community needs. Whereas the investigated LEADER regions did not show any indication that this was the case, even oppositely, some projects formerly funded under LEADER now found funding within national programmes. Therefore, it is proposed that the clear local turn towards projects incorporating social and communal interests should be seen as a success for creating territorial identity and bottom-up development within LEADER. Although discussing the political, ideological or regulative features regarding what should be the intended aim of LEADER projects is outside the scope of this paper, we should still see

the findings as part of an impetus for reevaluating rural policy design. Here, the extension of the LEADER method under the broader term Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) and the propagation of multi-funded interventions can be seen as a step in the right direction away from purely economic aims and towards a more prominent place for multidimensional development. Furthermore, the recent consultation process initiated by the EU Commission, which invites actors and organisations to take part in developing a long-term vision for the EU's rural areas, should take heed to ensure the development of a strategy, which is not just cross-sectoral but encompasses all dimensions of life in rural areas.

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