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# The antenarrative of sensemaking: building participation via LEADER

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**Abstract :** We look at a LEADER organizations as storytelling organizations that unfold around the understanding and praxis of participation.

European Union LEADER programme is defined as a territorially based and participative approach to development. Since its mainstreaming into the European Union Programmes it has been progressively bureaucratized and is being perceived as a tool of Europeanization. A tool framed on the level of European Union by its seven features: bottom-up approach, area-based approach, the local partnership, an integrated and multi-sectoral strategy, networking, innovation and cooperation. The implementation of these features is left to each Member State. The understanding and praxis of these features is everyday work of LAG managers.

**We ask how is participation built in everyday life of such organizations?**

We employ an *antenarrative* research design that directs our analytic attention to the flow of lived experience (Boje, 2001) so as to investigate the sensemaking process between the organizational actors that frame the understanding and praxis of participation. Embedded in the experience of the author as a LAG manager we hypothesize that the understanding of participation, one that is underlining seven features of LEADER, lies in the sensemaking practices of all the actors involved in the management of these organizations.

In order to prove our hypothesis and therefore answer to our question we build an antenarrative out of an array of data such as: memos, promemorias, reports, diaries, anecdotes, emails and social media communication and personal autoethnography. Antenarrative as an experience of the storytelling life with abbreviated and interrupted story performances that yield plurivocality) allows us to demonstrate the micro actions that are non-linear, ambiguous and show lived experiences of actors (Boje, 1995) . We present our results in a form of a non-linear narrative that delineates recurring types of practices that embody the understanding and praxis of participation within one LEADER organization from 2013-2019.

**Key words:** participation, antenarrative, sensemaking, Europeanization, LEADER

## I. Introduction

Research in management studies has started paying increased attention to multistakeholder initiatives (MSIs). They are defined as *private governance mechanisms involving corporations, civil society organizations, and sometimes other actors, such as governments, academia or unions to cope with social and environmental challenges* (Moog, Spicer, & Böhm, 2015, p. 2). They have been seen crucial for development (Bosworth et al., 2016; Ray, 1999). Researchers in development studies have argued that a development process is seen as based on local resources and community participation and is stimulated via an simultaneous or individual interaction of (a) local actors, (b) outside actors such as national governments, (c) mid-level actors such as local non-governmental organizations supported by various external entities. (Ray, 2000a).

We know that these initiatives are potentially very positive, but we know less on how to make them work. Evidence both from development, and from management studies points out that sometimes they work, and sometimes not.

One of the central problems here is the problem of participation. Development studies, see participation as *involvement of a significant number of persons in situations or actions that enhance their well-being, such as their income, security, self-esteem etc.* (Nawaz, 2013, p.27) so as to increase *the receptivity and ability of rural people to respond to development programs as well as to encourage local initiatives* (ibid.)

Initially at the core of development projects in the poorer regions of the world researchers on community-based development have seen that *participation in the absence of state facilitation can result in a closed village economy that limits the possibility for improved public action* (Mansuri & Rao, 2004, p. 26). And that this community involvement is almost dominated by the elites as they tend to be better educated and have fewer opportunity costs on their time (ibid, p.30). Participation has been seen as *an instrument for promoting pragmatic policy interests, such as cost-effective delivery or low-cost maintenance, rather than a vehicle for radical social transformation* (ibid).

*MSI's and their standards interact with the local political and economic contexts and are often "seized" by powerful actors embedded in hierarchical local power structures. The result is often a reinforcement of existing local power inequalities* (Cheyns & Risgaard, 2014, p. 7)

Research on community-based development within the European Union has encountered similar critiques in the EU where it was seen as *redistributing political power by*

*giving preference to rural/local actors, and partially discriminating in favour of actor networks and against state bureaucracy* (Kovach 2000, p.183) . Maurel (2008) has observed *low level of citizen's participation, the formation of interest groups monopolising access to grants, and the action of consultancy offices and development agencies* ( *ibid*, p. 528) within the Hungarian, Czech and Polish LAGs. Koutsouris (2008, p. 252) goes as far as to define LEADER as a tool of hegemony where *experts and managers on one hand neglect local knowledge and local perplexities and particularities and on the other (...) endorse changes without paying due attention to their systemic effects as challenges to local structures*. Kovach & Kucherova (2009) question the participative practices of LAG professionals arguing participation is simply a formality not a practice. Thuesen (2010) looked into the structure of the governing boards of LAGs discussing the issue of representative democracy and participation of mostly well educated, rich, older men in Danish LAG governing boards. Lukic & Obad (2016) analyse the emergence of LAGs in Croatia indicating the emergence of new project class that either manages participation or is absorbed by local politics. Hubbart & Gorton (2011, p. 92) refer to the Austrian case that suggest adopting the practice of participation requires several years of learning by doing of local actors. By observing participatory practices within LAG territories Mueller et al (2020) deduct that participation as a social practice is constantly negotiated in specific physical-spatial settings that are defined in a performative way.

All this points out that membership within MSIs, such would be local action groups (LAGs) does not necessarily guarantee participation. Success is predicated on the fact that you manage to have multiple interests. The ideology behind community-led local developments stresses that development needs to be embedded in endogenous resources. Resources which should be activated and harnessed through targeted bottom-up, participatory development programmes (Herbert-Chesire & Higgins 2004, p. 290 in Mueller et al. P. 224). Meaning that by tapping into multiple sources of knowledge and expertise of various actors , that is the human and social capital existing within the territory, we manage to find better solutions to things.

However, the problem is that the fact that different actors make part of this multistakeholder setting doesn't necessarily mean that they participate. They dedicate time, energy, resources to advance the goals of MSIs - if they are allowed and enabled to participate by contributing. So participation, how to stimulate it and how to sustain it towards the accomplishment of the goals of MSI is a crucial question to which we still don't have any good answers.

Literature on development studies says they have begun to address this problem and we know certain things. Maurel (2008, p. 528) points out that the actions of consultancy offices and development agencies have monopolized participation. Furthermore, that programmes of community development have become a tool of hegemony where experts and managers neglect local knowledge and local perplexities (Koutsouris 2008, 252).

Esparcia et al. (2015, p. 33) have begun addressing this problem by delineating three views on LEADER as a community-based development programme: 1) LEADER as an instrument of power in the hands of power-groups within LAGs and their clientelist networks; (2) LEADER as an instrument of local economic development; (3) LEADER as a tool for social networking, capacity building, local empowerment and local democracy. But there are still important aspects of this phenomenon that are still not very well understood.

Therefore, we ask *what are the actions that build participation via contributions of various actors that take part in these multistakeholder initiatives, LAGs.*

Literature on strategic research within the field of management studies defines participation as an activity comprising structures, practices and processes that help lower level organizational actors to take part in strategy work (Laine and Vaara, 2007; Mantere and Vaara, 2008 in Tavella, 2020, p. 1). Participation around MSIs is constructed in the form of multistakeholder alliances, partnerships, standards and round tables following different procedural approaches that can result in a dialogue platform or an independent organisation with its own governance structure. (Martens et al., 2018, p. 3) such as power-sharing rules that allow for equal participation (Luttrel et al. 2018), establishment of working groups (Schouten et al., 2012) or public consultation (Cheyns & Risgaard, 2014).

Development studies scholars have investigated participation techniques either from the perspective of international organizations such as World Bank or with a more national focus, looking into the participation techniques that unfold around the European Union LEADER programme. Participation is constructed through the process of involvement in decision making processes, implementing programs, sharing in the benefits of development programs or involvement in evaluation of such programs (Nawaz, 2013 p; 27). Researchers looking into LEADER (Mueller et al. 2020, 226) describe participation as a social practice that is negotiated and legitimised through ritual-like situations.

I would like to demonstrate what are the type of activities and practices that build participation and how they define the meaning of participation, one that is dependent on its performance.

Based on my analysis of different LEADER organizations is that in MSIs how you define participation will affect performance. The question I ask is therefore: **how is participation built in day-to-day operations of an MSI organization?**

I argue that participation is based on the day-to-day activities of the organization. Real participation has to be built in day to day operations of the organization and on the example of “LAG 5” I will show you how and why. Therefore, my real question is based in the fact that MSIs are formed. They have a specific organizational design, structure and roles, but the literature on LEADER show us that there is a problem with this. There is a difference between the formally assigned set of roles and responsibilities and the actual participation. Participation means that roles are enacted. That this formal structure within which these various stakeholders actually dedicate time, energy, resources, attention to perform the roles they are set to do enacts a form of participation that will allow for real contribution. By drawing on the example of LAG 5 members who have built and voluntarily worked on implementing development project in their territory with this organisation.

Our presentation is structured as follows. Multistakeholder initiatives are defined in the context of participative modes of development, such is the LEADER programme. Drawing on the analytical framework developed by Martens et al (2018) we investigate the sensemaking process between the organizational actors that frame the understanding and praxis of participation. Before coming to our empirical findings, we present our research context, case study approach and methodology. Participation as an everyday practice of the organisation is analysed on the example of an LEADER organization lead author has worked in. In the discussion and conclusion we interpret the findings and provide insight into avenues for further research.

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