

Article

Intangibles of Rural Development. The Case Study of La Vera (Extremadura, Spain)

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Abstract: In the early 1990s, with the Leader Initiative, the European Commission intended to apply a new development model in order to encourage the economic diversification of the rural world. The expectations raised by the first Leader Initiative motivated Spain to approve the Proder Program to allow those regions that had not been beneficiaries of the aforementioned initiative to put similar projects into practice. This kind of program has various characteristics, which have been widely studied from a theoretical point of view. Nevertheless, empirical studies that analyze the relevance of those characteristics (especially the intangible ones) are less frequent. The main objective of this research is, precisely, to study how these intangibles materialize in the implementation of a rural development strategy. For this, a qualitative methodology based on a case study of the La Vera region is adopted. The results show that these intangible characteristics obtain a disparate valuation from the local promoters. While aspects such as the management system or the contribution of these programs to regional identity are well valued, others, such as the participation of the population in development processes, do not seem to reach the expectations. This study gives some proposals for the evaluation of these characteristics.

Keywords: Proder Program; management system; economic diversification; bottom-up approach; regional identity

1. Rural Development Programs as Study Area: Context, Novelty and Objectives of the Research

The European Commission's concern about Rural Development Programs must be framed in the context of the imminent loss of relevance in rural areas that agriculture had previously maintained. In the early 1980s, the European Commission [1,2] proposed deep reforms in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Furthermore, on the basis of several documents, especially "The Future of Rural Society" [3], it simultaneously promoted a debate about rural development policies and the necessity of rural areas to advance from a model based on agricultural development to another oriented around economic diversification.

In the early 1990's, that debate considered the first Leader Initiative [4], whereby a development model was validated that, based on modest investments, would promote development and economic diversification in rural areas. Although such initiatives had a very limited budget, the expectations generated in European rural areas made that these kinds of programs continue to the present day. For this, the European Commission made use of different instruments. In the first stage, the Leader maintained its Common Initiative condition through Leader II [5] and Leader + [6]. Because of these two editions, the implementation of the Leader approach caused a qualitative jump in the

form of a fivefold increase in the number of Local Action Group (LAGs) beneficiaries [7] and notable territorial expansion (more than a half of the European Union's territory). In the 2007–2013 period, the creation of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) [8] and its articulation through Regulations 1698/2005 [9] and 1974/2006 [10] implied the execution and funding of endogenous programs of rural development as an another axis of the aforementioned Fund.

The large mobilization of European rural areas in order to have options in the granting of Leader funds implied that, during the second part of this Initiative, part of the presented proposals did not get passed the selection process. In order to give a response to these territories, some European countries, such as Spain, designed Rural Development Programs following the Leader's model and objectives. This is how the Proder I [11] and Proder II [12] Programs arose, with the objective of the Spanish regions classified as Objective 1 being excluded from the Leader II (1994–2000) and Leader + (2000–2006) selection processes, respectively, thus being able to implement programs oriented towards economic diversification of rural areas. The changes experienced in the implementation of the Leader Initiative in the period 2007–2013 coincided with the end of the Proder Program and the inclusion of most of the territories that had been managing it in the so-called Leader Approach.

Although they do not perfectly align, in essence, the Proder Program's principles and philosophy are inspired by those proposed by the Leader Initiative. The European Association for Information on Local Development (AEIDL) distinguishes up to seven specialties of the model proposed by Leader [7,13]. Amongst them, Proder shares four: relevance given to LAGs as a managing entity, as well as their multi-sectorial, bottom-up, and territorial approach. Taking into account that the proposed case study refers to a region that saw both editions of the Proder Program, this research focuses its analysis regarding these four characteristics. Regarding its community Initiative condition, the European Commission defined three more characteristics in the design of the Leader Initiative (the innovative character of the action, introduction of networking, and transnational cooperation) that do not appear in the Proder Program due to its national character.

Departing from the management model characterized by a decentralized funding system, the LAG appears as the highest decision-making body in the definition of development strategies and awarding grants. Understanding of the relevance of LAGs requires knowledge of every task developed by one of its key parts: The Rural Development Centers (CEDER). Integrated by technical personnel, these structures are responsible for the administration of the program, for the implementation of the agreements adopted by the decision-making bodies, and for advising promoters.

The multi-sectorial character of the Rural Development Programs has a lot to do with the objective of economic diversification. This implies the implementation of activities in several economic sectors, as well as the integration of all of them into a single development strategy oriented towards the creation and conservation in the territory of the highest possible added value.

Local participation, based on including social collectives into the development strategies, is another one of the Rural Development Program's characteristics. Unlike the developmentalist model, which is based on the execution of large-scale action designed and implemented by outsider agents and institutions, the bottom-up approach is centered around development processes that are activated "from bottom to top" and can count on wide social support. LAGs must channel people's participation in these processes, aiming to become a reflection of the society, and are integrated in three sectors: (a) institutional, with the representation of every town of the Association of Municipalities, (b) entrepreneurial, representing entrepreneurs and economic agents, and (c) associative, where cultural, social, ecologist, etc. associations from the territory are represented.

Finally, it is worth noting that territory delimitation is a highly relevant question for Rural Development Programs. These programs evaluate territory not only as a mere sphere of resources and people, but as a factor whose characteristics condition its own competitiveness [14]. The territorial approach is based on a scope of action: The Association of Municipalities. Between a local level (too small) and a regional one (too wide), Rural Development Programs define the Association of Municipalities as "such a territorial area homogeneous enough for sharing problems and solutions" [15]

(p.95). Regarding this, it is easy to understand why this paper uses this same geographic area as a research area.

Despite the importance that the Leader approach gives to these four characteristics, measuring the way Rural Development Programmes contribute to them is a challenge. This is because of their intangible or immaterial nature, and the fact that their implementation in a development strategy follows a principle of mainstreaming which is not linked to the implementation of a particular measure or type of investment. These difficulties have meant that the study of intangibles has been relegated to the lines of research of Rural Development Programmes. Researchers in the field have often preferred to focus on other, more quantifiable aspects.

From a theoretical point of view, Shahab et al. [16] propose the need to measure all the impacts that may be generated by the application of a certain policy. In this effort, these authors propose taking into account other evaluation criteria such as efficiency or equity. Guyadeen and Seasons [17] or Oliveira and Pinho [18], while acknowledging the efforts of the scientific literature to broaden the knowledge of evaluation systems, consider that there are still some aspects that have not been sufficiently studied. This research is based on the premise that, in terms of rural development, intangibles would be one of them. Analysis of those immaterial specificities is very complicated [19] and requires going beyond the systems traditionally used by administrations and consultancies to evaluate the implementation of Rural Development Programs [20]. It is in this context where the main objective of this research arises: to study how these intangibles materialize in the implementation of a rural development strategy. The achievement of this objective is based on the formulation of four research questions relating to each of the intangibles analysed: (1) Is the used management system capable for incentivizing investments?; (2) how is the contribution of these programs to the economic diversification of their territories perceived?; (3) have social groups played a relevant role in the program implementation?; and (4) what valuation deserves the interest of these programs for other actions of territory revaluation?

The way this research aims to achieve its objective is another notable novelty of this work, given that the interviews with the private promoters involved in the implementation of the program are the main source of the used information. This approach turns the promoters into the evaluators of the development program. Very often, the interest of researchers in the figure of the promoter has been limited to quantifying their investments, the jobs created and/or consolidated, etc. However, the opinion of these investors regarding the execution of the program has been discounted. This is paradoxical because they are the privileged witnesses of the dynamics generated by the implementation of the programs under analysis.

Having set out the objective and questions of the research, the following section approaches the theoretical framework. Section 3 justifies the choice of the field of study, and provides details concerning the methodological aspects. Section 5 shows the research results related to contributions made by other authors. Finally, the most relevant conclusions are presented.

2. Literature Review

The materialization of those four intangible characteristics within a rural development strategy cannot be assessed only on the basis of the criteria traditionally used from a quantitative perspective. A review of the literature shows numerous studies that analyze various aspects related to Rural Development Programs based on parameters such as the distribution of investment per inhabitant or per square kilometer, financing by measures, types of promoters, the creation and improvement of employment, incorporation of young people and women into the labor market, etc. In Spain, examples of this type of research can be found that focus on various aspects related to the application of Rural Development Programs in regions such as Cantabria [21], Castilla La Mancha [22], Castilla y León [23], Aragón [24], Andalucía [25], and Extremadura itself [26,27]. Similar studies can also be found in the border areas of Extremadura and Portugal [28] or in other Portuguese regions [29].

On the other hand, the analysis of the impact of Rural Development Programs on the tourism sector constitutes another broad line of research that has usually used quantitative approaches.

In addition, in this case, it is possible to find very diverse studies based on the experience of the different Spanish regions such as, the Valencian Community [30,31], Murcia [32], Galicia [33], Andalucía [34,35], Extremadura [36], Castilla La Mancha [37,38], and Castilla y León [39]. Internationally, there are countless investigations focused on the analysis of rural tourism impacts in different countries, such as Portugal [40], Italy [41], and Greece [42,43], to name a few.

Investigating the role that LAGs have in investment activation, the proliferation of non-agrarian economic activities, the implication of social collectives on the development process, and repercussions regarding territorial identity due to program implementation requires the use of other research techniques, given the intangible nature of the elements being studied. Beyond theoretical contributions [44] from various perspectives, the analysis of these intangible characteristics has been studied by various authors.

Pérez Rubio [45] analyzed the relevance of intangibles in the processes of rural development in Extremadura (the region to which La Vera belongs). Saz-Gil and Gómez-Quintero [46] analyzed the relevance of social capital as an element of rural development. Esparcia et al. [47] or Moyano [48–50] study this same question and conclude that aspects related to the social dimension, or the interaction between the different institutions and agents operating in a territory, can be crucial in explaining the success or failure of endogenous development processes in rural areas.

Buciega [51] analyzed the role of LAGs as instruments of development and governance in rural areas. On this subject, Esparcia et al. [52] show the tensions that have arisen in the articulation of the LAGs given the interest of the different groups in taking control of decision-making. Alberdi [53] studied the difficulties of the business sector in becoming involved in the operation of the aforementioned cited LAGs. Garrido and Moyano [54] investigated the participation of the population in the Rural Development Programs (a subject which Navarro et al. [55,56] are very critical of). The involvement of the population in rural development processes and the role of LAGs in this task has been analyzed from a variety of perspectives based on the experience of different European countries, by authors such as Osti [57], Lukic and Obad [58], Chmieliński [59] or Marquardt et al. [60]. Among those international case studies, those from Quaranta et al. [61] or Salvia and Quaranta [62] could be mentioned. These works point out the need to rebuild the social capital of rural areas as a previous step before facing the challenge to start a rural development strategy.

Chevalier et al. [63,64] are critical of the excessive regulation introduced in the latest editions of the Leader Initiative and consider that this has distorted the original principles of this Initiative. In line with Esparcia et al. [52], the analysis by Chevalier et al. [63] on the application of the Leader approach in different European regions detects a tendency of local elites, in this case municipal politicians, trying to monopolise the LAGs' decision-making process. The influence that institutional presence has on the management systems of the Leader approach is also analysed by Bruckmeier [65] who, based on his analysis of this approach, has a negative influence on its capacity for innovation.

Shucksmith [66], in his analysis of the Leader approach in the United Kingdom, concludes that the model applied by the Initiative favours those who hold a position of power in relation with those sectors of the population less involved in these development processes. Konečný [67] highlights the great contrasts in the application of the Leader approach between European countries and suggests that the management systems and the operation of the LAGs are one of the differentiating elements in the results obtained by some groups and others. Like Chmieliński [59] or Salvia and Quaranta [62], Konečný [67] suggests that more territorially and socially cohesive spaces present more advantages when it comes to successfully applying rural development strategies.

Regarding the territorial approach and its commitment to the economic diversification of the rural areas, due to the relevance of tourism investments within the development strategy undertaken by the region of La Vera, it is appropriate to refer to works such as those of Muresan et al. [68,69], Abdollahzadeh and Sharifzadeh [70], or Harun et al. [71] in which the perception of rural residents towards the development of the tourism sector is measured.

3. Research Scope: La Vera as a Case Study

Investigations based on the case study method do not justify their representativeness on the basis of a large number of interviews. This quality cannot be justified in statistical terms because the methodology employed circumscribes the fieldwork to the case under study. As noted by Coller [72] (p.56), the representativeness of case studies must be justified in analytical terms, arguing that “the case is appropriate for the type of theoretical discussion that is to be elucidated by its analysis”. In this sense, who defend the usefulness of the case study methodology [72–76] point out various aspects that should be taken into account when justifying its use. Among these, the following points should be highlighted: (a) that the chosen case has clear limits; and (b) that it is valid to compare the issue being studied. La Vera meets these two conditions because:

- a) It is a territory with clearly defined borders: located in the northeast of the province of Caceres, bordered to the north by the Sierra de Gredos and Jerte river valley, to the east by the provinces of Avila and Toledo, to the south by the river Tietar, and to the west by the region of Plasencia. With a total area of 885.98 km² and a total of 19 municipalities, La Vera allows to easily delimit the borders of the case under study (Figure 1). The fact that La Vera is located in Extremadura (Spain) is not insignificant, since authors such as González [77] consider this region to be an ideal area in which to analyze the effects of Rural Development Programs on the territory.

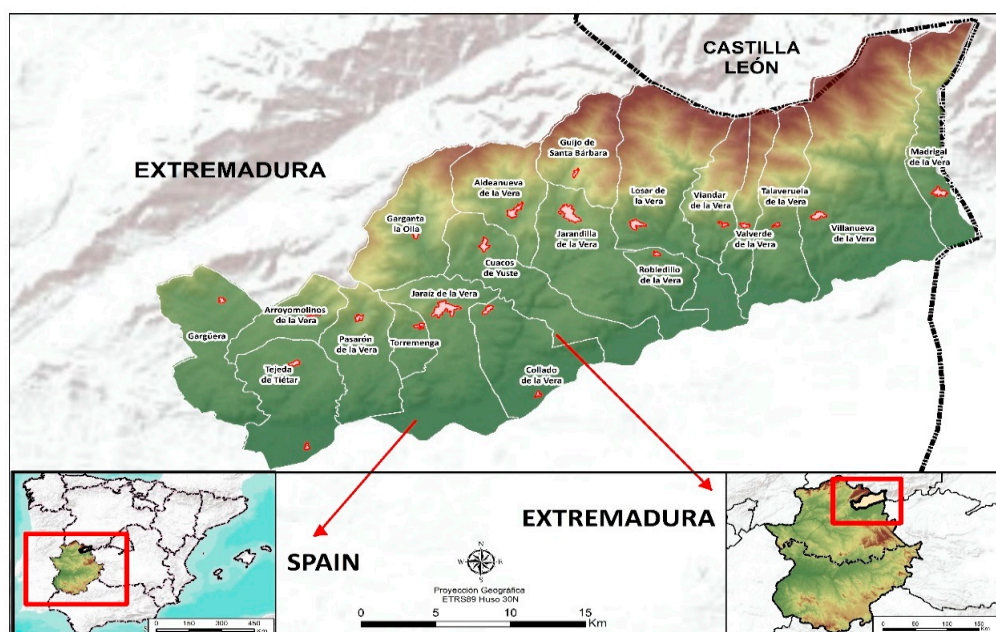


Figure 1. Boundaries and location of La Vera. Source: Own elaboration.

- b) La Vera is an excellent example in which to study various aspects related to the implementation of the Rural Development Programs. This is due to the following points:
 - (b1) The existence of valuable resources with great potential for the development of rural tourism, and therefore, economic diversification. These resources include:
 - Natural and landscape resources inherent to the Sierra de Gredos. Depending on their altitude, Gredos possesses emblematic foothills suitable for practicing mountain sports. Their hydrographic network, composed of multiple gorges with pure and crystalline waters, are a major tourist resource in the summer season. Also, the Sierra de Gredos influences the climate of the area creating a microclimate characterized by mild temperatures and abundant humidity that generates a rich landscape.

- Remarkable cultural resources including: (1) festivals declared of regional tourist interest such as Los Empalaos and El Peropalo; (2) a huge religious and cultural heritage of which the Monastery of Yuste is a good example; and (3) an architectural heritage whose best exponents are the five municipalities declared Historic–Artistic Ensembles.
- (b2) There is a long tradition of producing products very characteristic of the area, of high quality, and based on the use of the endogenous resources of the territory. Some of these products are paprika, tobacco, and goat's cheese. It should be remembered that one of the strategies by which Rural Development Programs seek to achieve economic diversification is 'agricultural development and marketing' measures, which aims to create and retain the highest possible added value on the basis of local production.

4. Research Methodology

In his works about the case study, Yin [75] recommends applying this methodology in situations in which the question to be studied is interrelated with the study context. This is what happens in the case under analysis: it is not possible to de-link the relevance that intangibles have acquired in the development strategy of La Vera, of the different elements inherent in said space (dynamism of the population, professionalism of the technicians responsible for managing the program, pre-existing territorial structure, etc.). The phenomenon to be studied (intangibles) and the context in which they are studied (La Vera) interrelate and feedback each other. This is the reason why numerous authors [78–82] have resorted to this same methodology to study aspects related to the relevance that local people's participation and social capital can acquire in development processes.

The methodology used is an essential factor to understand this research goal in order to going beyond other studies related with Rural Development Programs. Yin [76] argues that qualitative research tools such as conducting interviews can improve the understanding of the information provided by the interviewee by allowing interaction and for an adequate contextualization of their opinions. Based on these premises, this research uses a qualitative methodology based on a broad fieldwork project in which several sources of information are distinguished:

1. Analysis of the general documentation of the Program: In the first phase of the fieldwork, at the LAG headquarters, a multitude of documents related to the implementation of the program were consulted. This made it possible to configure the "universe" of research, to study the projects implemented under the program, and to locate information that would subsequently provide access to the promoters.
2. Conducting interviews as the main source of information. With respect to the interview model, semi-structured interviews were considered to be the most appropriate model: they were not a closed instrument (unable to incorporate any assessments of interest made by the interviewees), and at the same time, their semi-open nature allowed for the joint analysis and processing of the information obtained. Rural Development Programs have two types of measures: productive and unproductive. Private promoters receive their subsidies from the productive measures. It is therefore on these that the research is focused. The temporal scope of the analysis covers the two editions of the Proder Program. Given the large number of private projects implemented under the productive measures during this period, it was necessary to select a sample of them. To this end, three criteria were applied: (a) that the impulse and the main source of financing were private; (b) that Proder's contribution amounted to a minimum of 12,000 euros; and (c) that this subsidy had a certain relevance in the financing of the project, representing at least 20% of the total investment. Table 1 shows the investments represented by the projects included in the sample and the total resources committed in each of the productive measures.

Table 1. Representativeness of the selected sample according to the investment.

| Investment | Tourism | SMEs | Valorization | Total |
|----------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Sample projects | 3,180,385,30 | 883,561,20 | 673,160,61 | 4,737,107,11 |
| Total implementation | 4,230,097,15 | 1,665,948,03 | 1,369,413,23 | 7,265,458,41 |
| % | 75.18% | 53.04% | 49.16% | 65.20% |

Source: Own elaboration.

As shown in the table above, the criteria applied allow for a representative sample of the total productive investments to be obtained. However, it should be clarified that, within these productive measures, some projects with a predominantly public character are also addressed. This type of action involves the investment of 827,905.04 euros. If we deduct this amount from the total investment shown in Table 2, the private projects selected in the sample would represent 73.58% of the private productive investment executed.

There are 44 projects included in the research sample. Of this total, 34 interviews were carried out since seven of the businesses had ceased to operate, two had been transferred (meaning that it was no longer possible to access the original developer), and in only one case was it not possible to carry out the interview due to the promoter's lack of interest.

Table 2. Number of projects in the sample and interviews conducted.

| | Tourism | SMEs | Valorization | Total |
|----------------------------|---------|------|--------------|-------|
| Sample projects | 24 | 12 | 8 | 44 |
| Failed projects | 5 | 2 | | 7 |
| Non-interview projects | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Total conducted interviews | 18 | 9 | 7 | 34 |

Source: Own elaboration.

The statistical sample is made up of 44 projects of the 79 projects financed in La Vera with private participation in the study period [83]. These 44 projects represent 55% of the total projects. Furthermore, calculating the n-optimal for finite population and with a statistical sample size of 79 (the projects with exclusively private financing), a sampling error of 9.8% is estimated with a confidence level of 95%. Although this is a case study, the statistical sample size can be assumed to be representative due to the results shown above.

The questionnaire that was used for the interview is structured in four blocks. The first one collects general information about the project; it is in this block where questions related to Proder's ability to incentivize investments are asked, with the main goal of obtaining the appraisal of the promoters regarding the management system used. The second block includes two questions related to the contribution of Proder to the economic diversification and the diffusion effect of the made investments. The third section obtains the interviewee's opinion regarding the articulation of their economic sector; it is a question of knowing if in La Vera there are social groups of a sectoral nature, what is the assessment of the promoters regarding the operation of these associations and what has been their role in the dissemination of Proder grants. Finally, a fourth block includes questions regarding Proder's contribution to other cross-cutting aspects related to the development of the area under study. Between these aspects would include regional identity or the recovery of natural and heritage resources.

Each one of those four blocks was made up of five closed questions. Furthermore, to end the interview, the promoters were asked an open-ended question, where they could reflect or make their assessment regarding the Proder Program. So, the questionnaire used for the interview grouping a

total of 21 questions, eight of them are referred to the intangible aspects that focus this research and whose results are presented in the next section.

3. On-site assessment of each of the projects in the sample: It was decided to conduct the interviews at the investment site. These trips provided direct contact with the key people in the research and made it possible to understand, first-hand, the objective of the investments, their viability, etc.
4. Triangulation of results: In the final phase of the fieldwork, an attempt was made to correct the possible biases that the interviewees could have incurred. Among these possible biases, it is worth highlighting the influence that the time elapsed between Proder Program execution and the conduct of the research could have had in the promoters' valuations. With cited objective, once the first conclusions were obtained from the interviews, they were "triangulated" by holding working meetings with those responsible for the technical implementation of the program. The purpose of these meetings was to contrast the extent to which the initial results of the research coincided with the opinion of those who, from a technical point of view, had greater knowledge of the program. These meetings were repeated with the final conclusions of the fieldwork.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Suitability of the Management System

With regard to this first issue, the research seeks to know whether the management system used is capable for incentivizing investments. For it, the interviews to promoters sought to ascertain their opinion with respect to two questions: (a) to what extent they decided to address their investments based on the grant offered to them by the program; and (b) what is their assessment of the management and processing of their project by the LAG technical team.

Konečný [67] suggests that management systems and the operation of the LAGs are one of the differentiating elements in the results obtained by rural development strategies in different territories. The questions raised by this research to the promoters make it possible to go deeper into some factors that could explain why it is like that.

With regard to the influence that receiving a grant might have had on the realization of their investments, as shown in Figure 2, three quarters of the promoters admitted that they would have tackled their projects without the help of Proder. However, most of them also admitted that their investment would have been more modest and longer term. These promoters considered that the subsidy received was the "incentive, the justification, the excuse", for which they decided to make investments that they had been maturing for some time and considered necessary for the expansion and even survival of their businesses. Almost a quarter of the promoters admitted that, in the absence of the Proder aid, they would not have undertaken their projects. It should be pointed out that the vast majority of those who expressed this view were tourism promoters who had made their investments in the first Proder call, in which the co-financing rate for this type of investment was higher.

With regard to the second question, Figure 3 leaves no doubt as to the assessment of the management system proposed. The promoters highlighted the proximity (both physical and human) of the technical team responsible for implementing the grants. This proximity is inherent to the regional dimension of the program and to the relations of proximity that result from it. Almost 60% of those interviewed valued the intervention of the technicians as very positive, stressing that their involvement went beyond mere bureaucratic/administrative assistance.

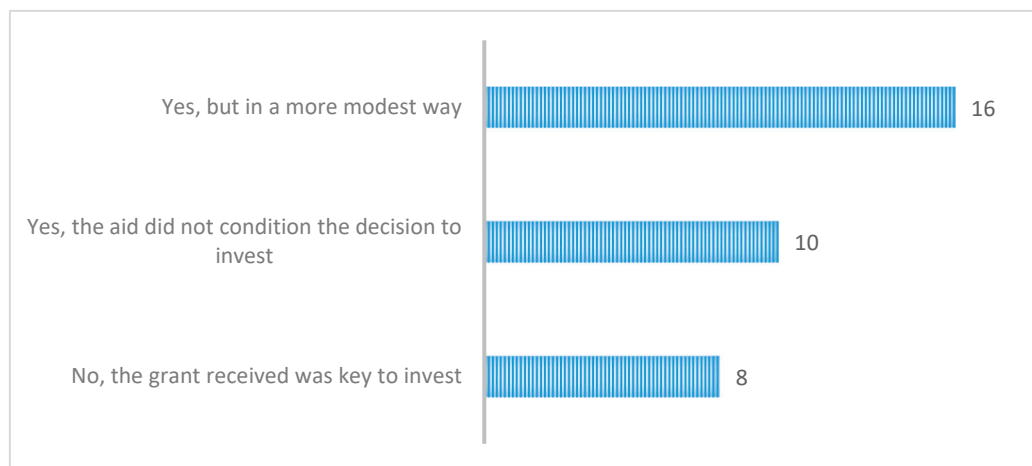


Figure 2. Would you have approached your project without Proder help? Source: Own elaboration.

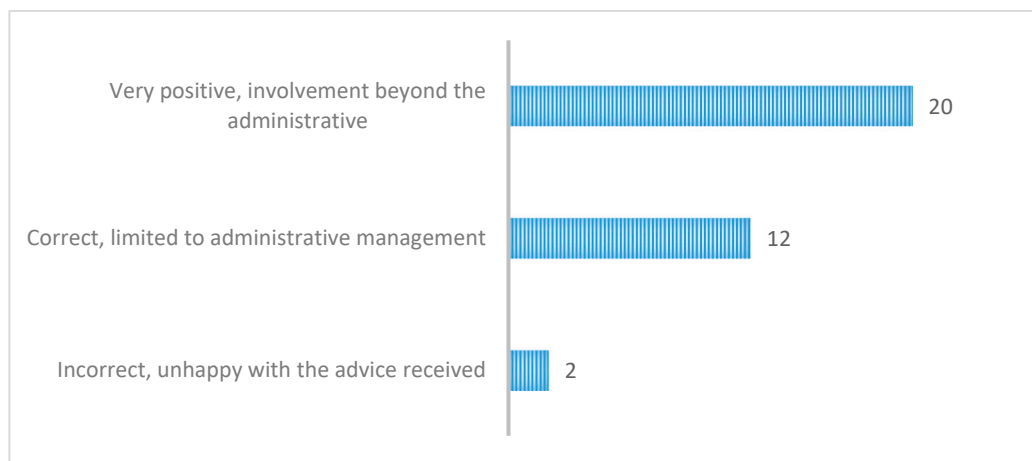


Figure 3. What has CEDER's role been in implementing your project? Source: Own elaboration.

5.2. Multi-sectorial Approach

Through their integrated and multi-sectorial approach, Rural Development Programs raise the need to promote investment in a wide range of economic activities and to integrate all of them within a single development strategy. The clear connection between this approach and the objective of economic diversification has already been noted. The second research question aims to find out how promoters perceive the achieving of this purpose.

The results of the interviews show that a majority of the promoters believed that Proder has contributed to the economic diversification of the area; however, only a small part understood that this was possible given the promotion of investments in various economic sectors. As shown in Figure 4, the vast majority of those who responded positively to the question justified their answer on the basis of Proder's investments in a single economic sector: rural tourism.

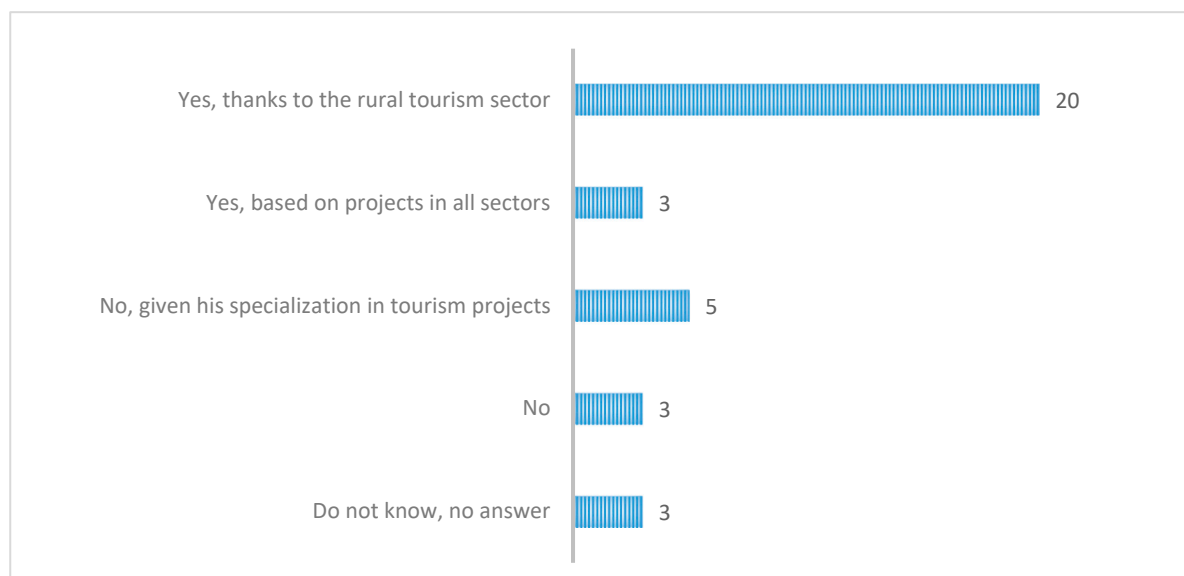


Figure 4. Do you think Proder has contributed to the economic diversification of the region? Through which sectors? Source: Own elaboration.

Closely linked to the multi-sectorial approach, the dissemination effect refers to the capacity of development programs to ensure that the investments made serve as an example and enable other entrepreneurs to undertake new projects. The existence of this dissemination effect is widely perceived by the promoters. It is even significant that most of the interviewees responded positively to the question posed (Figure 5), even though they were not able to give any examples.

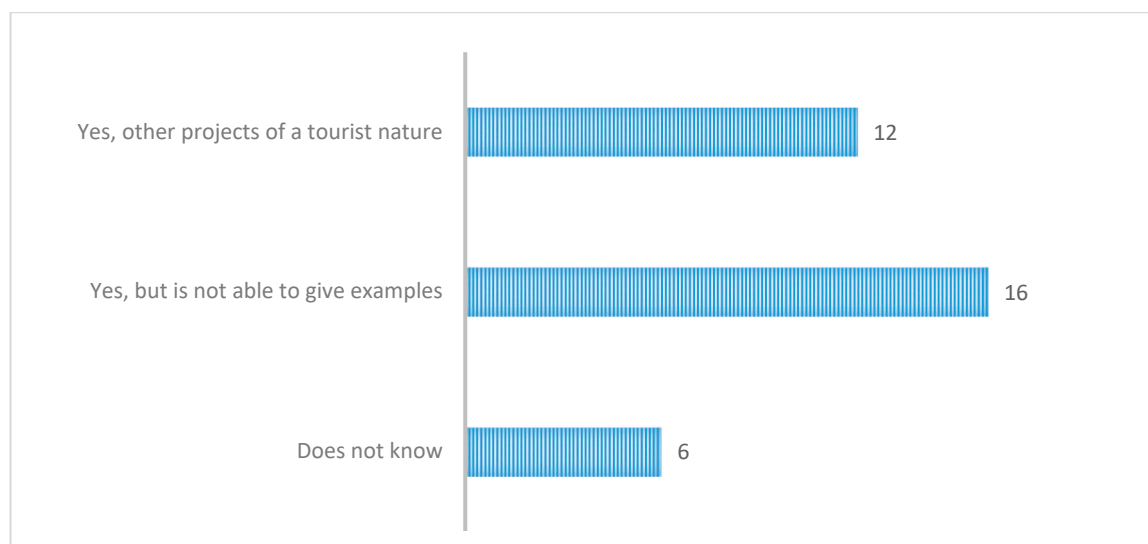


Figure 5. Do you think Proder has been able to encourage other people to undertake projects similar to yours? Examples? Source: Own elaboration.

In the two questions posed regarding this intangible, the only sector to which the interviewees refer is the tourism sector. In line with the results obtained from other research [68–71], it seems that in La Vera the perception of the promoters with respect to tourism development is positive. As shown in Figure 4, among the promoters, it seems to be a general perception that Proder's projects and investments were concentrated in this sector. Obviously, this concentration of resources in an economic activity is precisely the opposite of what the multi-sectorial approach aims at (in fact, who believed that Proder did not contributed to economic diversification criticized the program's excessive specialization

in tourism projects), but this does not prevent the majority of interviewees from positively evaluating Proder's contribution to economic diversification. Therefore, it seems that promoters perceive tourism investments as an element of development and, as shown in Figure 5, to a not insignificant extent, they understand that, in this sector, Proder's investments have had a multiplier effect.

5.3. Bottom-up Approach

In their analysis of the relevance of social capital in local development processes, Esparcia et al. [47] warn of the need to undertake case studies that will allow a deeper understanding of the issue, especially in those rural areas with a weaker productive fabric. This research could be considered a contribution along these lines. As mentioned, the bottom-up approach seeks to encourage the participation of the population in development processes. Social groups are the agents entrusted with this task. The questions posed with respect to this intangible try to evaluate the role that these groups had in the dissemination and implementation of Proder aid. As shown in Figure 6, the majority of the promoters became aware of the existence of the aid through their own means or thanks to the advice of the Local Development Agents (LDA) of the Local Councils of the zone. The LDAs are municipal technicians who, among other tasks, are in charge of managing the local employment boards developing a brokerage work, as well as advising those other people who try to start a business and need information about the available lines of help.

Only four promoters acknowledged having had knowledge of the Proder subsidies through a social group: Vera Tourism Association (ATURIVE). However, it should be noted that those who accessed the subsidies through this channel were managers or direct relatives of the managers of the aforementioned association.

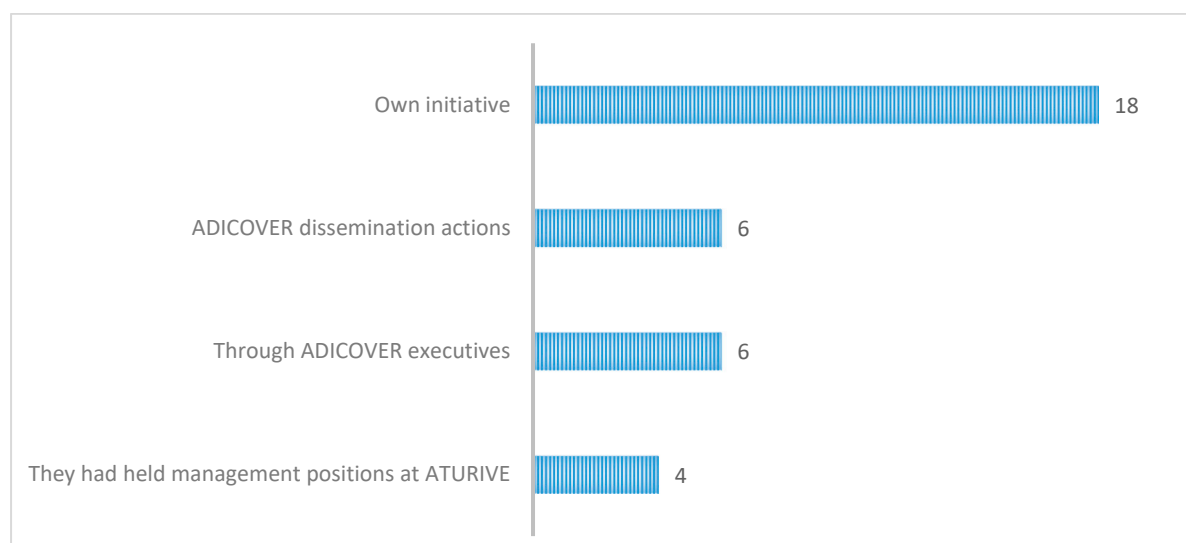


Figure 6. How did you find out about the existence of Proder aid? Source: Own elaboration.

Of the three productive measures, the only one in which there was an entity of a regional nature with the vocation of representing the interests of its sector was that of promoting rural tourism. Most of the tourist entrepreneurs are recognized as being members of ATURIVE. However, Figure 7 shows that only a small part of those interviewed (the association's leaders) consider its operation to be good. On the contrary, the vast majority of the tourism promoters qualify the work carried out by ATURIVE as regular or bad. There were also interviewees who were not even able to evaluate the activity of an entity that, in theory, should have stood up and defended its interests.

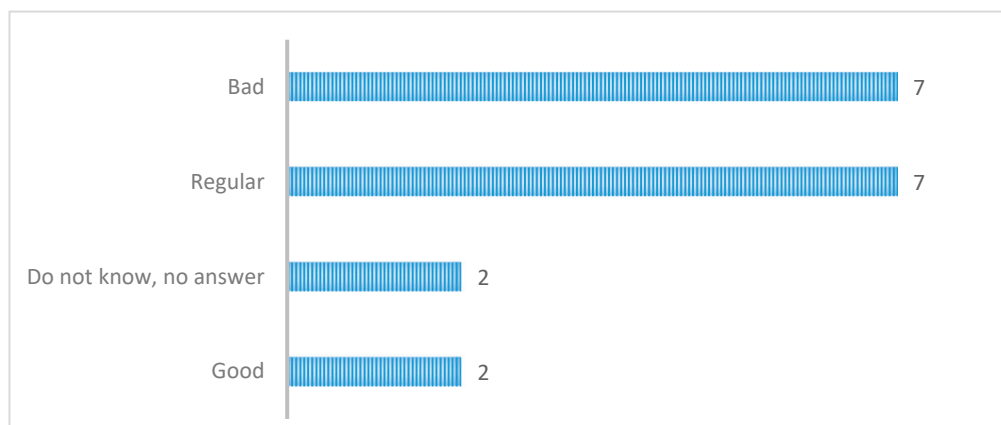


Figure 7. How do you value the operation of ATURIVE? Source: Own elaboration.

The scarce valuation of the tourist promoters with respect to the operation of ATURIVE, the anecdotal role of this association as a promoter of the Proder aids, added to the fact that it is their directors (or their direct relatives), the only ones who recognize having had knowledge of the aids through it, put into question the role of this group in the development process. It might be asked whether this is not one of those situations denounced by Esparcia et al. [52] or Chevalier et al. [63] in their study about the application of the institutional model of the Leader approach in various European regions. As it seems happening with La Vera tourist association, these authors denounce the tendency of local elites to "monopolize" the implementation of the development strategies in their respective territories. Results obtained show the difficulties encountered in implementing a bottom-up development model in La Vera. These conclusions would be in line with those obtained by Guiberteau [15], Navarro et al. [55,56], or Cejudo et al. [84], who show a critical position regarding the capacity of LAGs to implement a truly participatory rural development model.

It seems that the fact that businessmen and mayors of the region belong to the decision-making body ADICOVER is a factor in the dissemination of Proder aid. However, thought should be given to the need to establish control mechanisms to ensure that this does not become an element of 'exclusion' for other promoters who, not being part of these LAG management bodies or not having direct relations with the people who do belong to them, wish to have access to the aid on equal terms.

5.4. Contribution of These Programs to Other Aspects of Territorial Revaluation

As Figure 8 shown, a clear majority of promoters positively valued the effects of Proder on the feeling of belonging to the Association of Municipalities. Often, in the justification of their answers, the interviewees alluded to the promotion campaigns carried out under the rural tourism measure. Also worthy of mention is the recognized contribution of the program to the regional identity, but they point out that this existed prior to Proder. Those who are pronounced in this sense are corroborating some of the arguments used in the methodology section to justify the choice of the La Vera as the case study area.

It was not easy for the private promoters to evaluate Proder's contribution to the conservation of the natural resources and heritage. Almost 40% did not value this issue (Figure 9). Perhaps, the low level of involvement of the promoters in the development strategy is one of the causes that can explain their difficulty to value this issues of general interest linked to the philosophy of the program.

On the other hand, those who considered that Proder had contributed to these aspects highlighted its role in the recovery and signposting of hiking routes, as well as in other actions such as the recovery of small public spaces, the creation of viewpoints, and the adaptation of clean points. Some of those interviewed also highlighted the positive consequences for rural heritage of many of the tourist investments undertaken, given that they involved the restoration of buildings, the recovery of farms, etc.

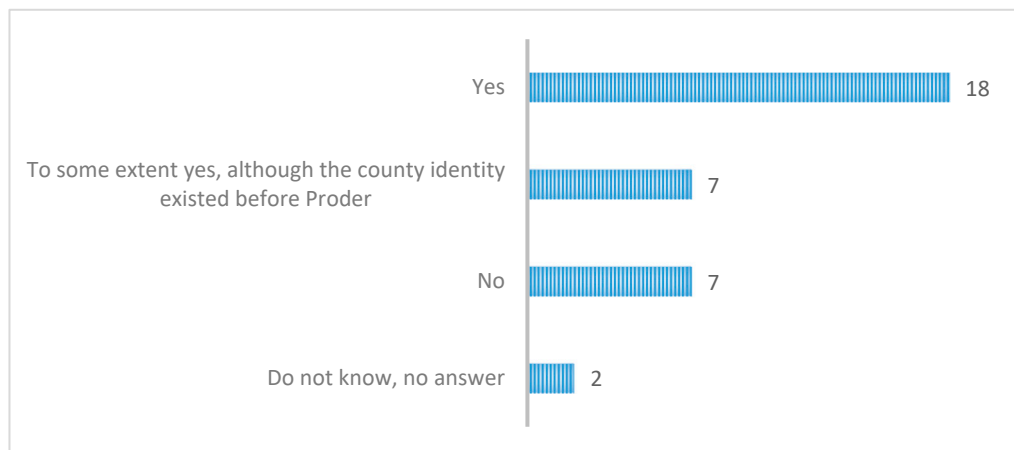


Figure 8. Do you think Proder has reinforced the regional identity? Source: Own elaboration.

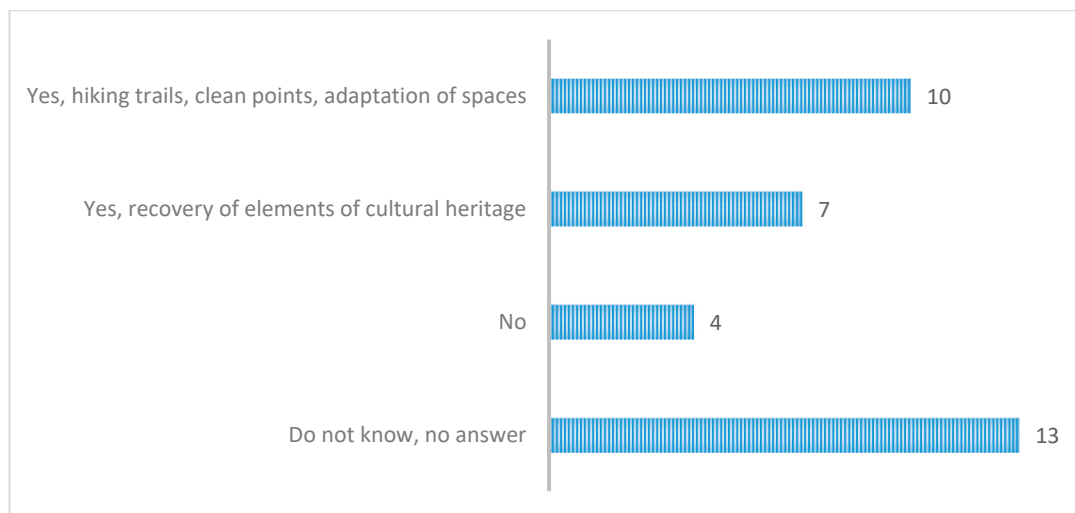


Figure 9. Do you think Proder has contributed to conserving the region's heritage and natural resources? Source: Own elaboration.

6. Conclusions

When relating the results of the investigation with those obtained by other authors, it must be kept in mind that the ideas set forth in the previous section are conditioned by the methodology used. This research is a case study, and this constitutes its main limitation, because it limits the analysis of intangibles to a specific area whose characteristics, in turn, influence the phenomenon under study.

Rural Development Programs are an interesting tool for activating and promoting investments in the rural environment; almost half of the interviewees acknowledged that Proder aid was the element that made them decide to make investments that they had been considering for some time. Among the factors that could explain this capacity are the regional dimension of their management systems and the relations of geographical and human proximity that result from this. However, on its own, the regional dimension does not explain the favorable opinion of the promoters regarding the management system. The involvement of the technical team is a factor that, to a certain extent, depends on something “intangible” such as the attitude with which they face the implementation of the program. Something that in one region may be very well valued, in another may not be so well valued. There is a human component to this issue; it would be interesting if the evaluation of these programs introduced greater relevance to the internal evaluation systems that would allow the promoters themselves to indicate their degree of satisfaction with the attention received and the work carried out by the LAG technical teams.

This research is committed to ensuring that the implementation of this kind of program incorporates internal audit systems that evaluate the quality of the procedures used in the implementation of the program. To date, most of the evaluation systems implemented have only focused on performance indicators based on investments made.

The perception of Proder's role in the economic diversification of the region seems to be distorted by an excessive concentration of investments in the rural tourism sector. This could compromise the program's intended multi-sectorial approach and call for flexible financial programming instruments so that the LAGs, as they detect an excessive concentration of projects in one sector, can change the co-financing rates for the others. On the other hand, the results of the research seem to show that the diffusion effect of the investments, their capacity to serve as an example to other entrepreneurs and to promote new projects, is part of the common ideology of the interviewed promoters.

The research results question the relevance of the social groups both in the execution of the program and in the dissemination of its lines of assistance. The implementation of a bottom-up approach, with a transparency principle, would make it advisable to periodically evaluate the percentage of subsidies that go to stakeholders who form part of the LAG's decision-making bodies, or the boards of the associations that have a voice and vote about them. In addition, it would be advisable to make the participation of social groups in the management bodies of the LAGs dependent on the correct functioning of these associations, the proper flow of information between their members, and the maintenance of a dynamic agenda of activities aimed at the whole of the sector that they represent.

On the contrary, a good proportion of the promoters point out the role that the LDAs of the different municipalities had in their projects. Bearing this in mind, and that a good part of the region's Town Councils form part of the LAG's decision-making bodies, it would be interesting to study formulas so that, with this participation quota, the opinion of these technicians is taken into account.

The analysis of the territorial approach shows the interrelations between the intangible aspects studied and the structure of the program. The promoters point out various actions by which they believe that Proder has contributed to strengthening the regional identity. Among these, it is worth highlighting the tourism promotion campaigns or the management system used to implement the grants. In any case, with their answers, the promoters showed that we are dealing with a region with well-defined borders and where, before Proder, there was already a feeling of belonging to the territory. These multiple interrelations between the program's structure and its intangible parameters were also detected when interviewees tried to justify the way in which Proder has contributed to the conservation of the region's natural resources. In this case, the investments undertaken as part of the unproductive measures to enhance local and rural heritage are the most frequently mentioned, although some promoters also mention in their replies the enhancement of private heritage resources resulting from the creation of various tourist accommodation projects.

Without forgetting the research limitations pointed out at the beginning of the discussion section, the research results represent an approach to the evaluation of the intangibles of rural development that can be a useful tool for those responsible for the planning, management, and evaluation of Rural Development Programs.

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