

Fisheries local action group managers as reflexive practitioners: The enhancement of projects and networks and the renewal of the Finnish fishing livelihood

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Abstract

The implementation of the European Fisheries Local Action Group (FLAG) system applies a neo-endogenous approach, which can restructure public intervention in favour of a mosaic of local territories. By resting on a Finnish case study, this article studies the local adaptation of the FLAG system and how FLAG managers are positioned as intermediaries in horizontal and vertical networks that enhance local fisheries' livelihoods. The analysis of the FLAG system's approaches and various roles of the managers is based on qualitative interviews and a stakeholder survey, set in the interactive governance framework. Our findings show how via its intermediary role, expertise, commitment and networking, the FLAG system, and especially FLAG managers, can mend the failures of the governance system. We conclude that the recruitment of the right type of FLAG managers can be a path towards the enhancement of local small-scale fishers in a well-functioning governance system.

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Commitment, Finland, Fisheries Local Action Groups, FLAG manager, network, small-scale fisheries

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the Fisheries Local Action Group (FLAG) system as a significant local and endogenous component within an otherwise predominantly hierarchical fisheries governance system. We focus on the implementation of Finnish FLAGs through a system that places an emphasis on their capability to support the renewal of coastal and inland small-scale fisheries and rural communities. Although the FLAG system in Finland has matured since its establishment in 2007, it has struggled to find its place among the numerous Finnish fisheries organisations and institutions. However, the bottom-up approach founded in the LEADER method and followed by the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) approach has shown the system's potential for producing new ideas, innovations, know-how, skills and partnerships among fishers and local stakeholders (Budeja-Said et al., 2022).

The unfavourable status of small-scale fisheries—which account for the majority of global fisheries—has largely been attributed to governance failures and the commonly neglected social consequences of policy decisions (Symes et al., 2015). However, as Chuenpagdee and Jentoft explain, small-scale fisheries' governance is undergoing encouraging forms of transformation 'from a top-down, hierarchical approach with government at the steering wheel, towards a more cooperative, network and partnership-based system, where civil society takes some of the governing functions' (Chuenpagdee & Jentoft, 2018, p. 102). By resting on the Finnish case, this paper assesses the FLAG system's potential as a cooperative arrangement that may ease the problems faced by small-scale fishing.

The FLAG system, and the so-called area-based development idea behind it (Budzich-Tabor, 2014), are indicative of this governance approach that is catalysing shifts of fisheries governance towards partnerships and collaboration. FLAGs, therefore, offer a potential compromise solution to the tensions that exist between a narrow sectoral approach of the EU's Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) and the broader territorial, or area-based, approaches promoted by the LEADER method, thereby enabling both individual and collective initiatives to prosper within a locally agreed development strategy (Phillipson & Symes, 2015).

This article analyses the mechanisms through which EU and national goals are differentiated and adapted to local fishery settings through FLAG-funded projects. The core aim is to assess the role of FLAG managers in this process. We focus on the Finnish case to study the implementation and local adaptation of the FLAG system and the consequent possibilities for the renewal of fishing livelihoods. During the recent programming period (2014–2020), FLAGs have come to cover major Finnish coastal and inland regions: nine in mainland Finland and one in the Åland Islands. They have initiated and funded more than 200 projects for various purposes. Their projects are usually locally initiated, small and targeted at producing new activities and networking. In addition to the project outcomes, an important feature of the system relates to the activities of managers employed by each FLAG (Salmi et al., 2022). We hold that managers' support for local fisheries development often goes beyond their official roles and conventional expectations. Thus, it is important to pay attention both to their visible and hidden work and its impact. Although managers' expertise, support and networking are important elements that

trigger local development, previous studies on the performance of the European FLAG system have very rarely focused on managers.

By drawing on Kooiman's interactive governance framework (Kooiman, 2003), we study not only the process of ensuring compatibility between the governance system (FLAG system) and to-be-governed systems (local and national fisheries systems) but also the interactions between the two systems. In the next section, the interactive governance framework will be addressed, together with the FLAG system and description of the empirical material of the Finnish FLAG system used for the analysis. Next, we examine the compatibility between the systems by comparing the similarities and differences of goals set for FLAGs at EU, national and local levels. Interactions in the FLAG system are thereafter addressed by focusing on the intermediary role of FLAG managers, networks and partnerships, and FLAGs' interplay with the rural local action groups (LAGs). The paper ends with a discussion and conclusions.

GOVERNANCE INTERACTIONS IN THE FLAG SYSTEM

Interactive governance theory (Kooiman, 2003) distinguishes three ideal modes of governance that differ according to their locus: hierarchical governance, self-governance and co-governance. Governance modes are neither clear-cut nor stable; in real life, they take hybrid forms (Chuenpagdee & Jentoft, 2018). The FLAG initiative can similarly be considered a (hybrid) co-governance structure within an otherwise hierarchical EU policy and funding landscape connected to the CFP. The system originates from the European Fisheries Fund (2007–2013), which initiated a radically different approach to the future of coastal communities (Symes et al., 2015). In Finland, the system continued through a second programming period (European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, EMFF 2014–2020) and is now entering a third programming period (2021–2027) through the European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF), with the operational programme approved on the 3rd of August 2022.

In some EU member countries, the implementation of the FLAG initiative has not been a success story for the enhancement of small-scale fisheries (Budeja-Said et al., 2022). One reason for challenges in implementation seems to be related to the 'paradox of participation', which suggests that with a greater number of actors involved comes less weight given to each and less importance given to actors traditionally linked to fishing (Pineiro-Antelo et al., 2019). In some cases, FLAGs have become 'instruments of political, social and political-economic power' (Pineiro-Antelo et al., 2019, p. 48). Thus, participation and involvement of local communities do not guarantee the better inclusion of local community and fisheries concerns.

The FLAG system may help local communities and small-scale fisheries by creating new opportunities for local participation, stakeholder collaboration, partnerships and other manifestations of co-governance (Salmi et al., 2022). One aspect of this is the local involvement and collaboration with rural LAGs, which have widened FLAGs' scope towards rural communities and beyond. According to Budzich-Tabor (2014), local partnership, which drives forward the implementation of the local area's strategy, is the most characteristic element that distinguishes FLAGs' territorial, area-based approach from other activities.

The implementation of the European FLAG system reflects a neo-endogenous approach, which can, according to Ray (2006), be brought about by restructuring public intervention away from individual sectors in favour of a mosaic of local/regional territories. Local participation rhetoric 'offers the prospect of local areas assuming greater influence over their futures by reorientating development around local resources and by setting up structures to sustain the local development

momentum following the initial official intervention' (Ray, 2006, p. 278). On the other hand, the politico-administrative rationale for neo-endogenous development is a manifestation of 'state managerialism' whereby the state enters arrangements with local actors contracted to deliver policy objectives. In this article, we study how FLAGs deliver wider (state and EU) objectives and how they relate to local settings and strategies. The neo-endogenous development intervention by the state or EU includes the flow of funds and the devolution of power to localities, which emphasises the importance of partnerships between the public, private and voluntary sectors (Ray, 2006).

In policy transfer, ideas and experiences can be copied from one local politico-economic context to another in unadulterated form (a straight transfer process), or the process might work by inspiration processes 'causing creative reactions in the receiving nodes/territories' (Ray, 2006, p. 287). While investigating the LEADER method and rural LAG projects, Andersson and Kovách (2010) highlight the paramount importance of variations of context and taking into consideration the surroundings in which LAGs are embedded in the LEADER method. Additionally, when focusing on the FLAG system, a highly important question is how the system fits with its context, namely, the to-be-governed system (Kooiman et al., 2005). The key question is therefore concerned with how to design the governance system in a way that it fits the challenges presented by the to-be-governed system in question (Chuenpagdee & Jentoft, 2018). Governance theory builds upon a three-systems model, where a system of governing interactions links the governing system and the to-be-governed system (Kooiman & Bavinck, 2005); in this article, we focus on the compatibility of the FLAG system (as a governance subsystem) with its local and national contexts (as to-be-governed systems such as fisheries and local communities). The system of governance interactions fostered by networks and partnerships is crucial for achieving a sufficient match.

The main outcomes of the FLAG system are channelled by multiple projects that are approved by the FLAGs' boards to fulfil the specific goals stated in their local development strategies (LDS). Funding directed through FLAGs accounted for 5% of Finland's EMFF funding between 2014 and 2019 and presented 11% of the total number of Finnish EMFF-funded projects. When examining the number of projects, it can be seen that the most popular themes were related to interactions between fisheries and fish-eating predators, educational measures and the development of harbours and other facilities. FLAG projects were funded by the EU (41%), the Finnish state (43%) and other sources (16%) (Salmi et al., 2020), although in addition to public funding, FLAGs have generally found it challenging to include municipality and private funding for financing their activities.

In line with Ray (2006, p. 288), 'the source of the process causing creative reactions in the receiving nodes/territories. Evidence from anthropology and sociology suggests that, in keeping with the logic of neo-endogenous development, local actors will mediate incoming ideas and interventions. The reflexive practitioner is a category of professional who functions as both a catalyst for local action and a mediator between the local territorial unit and the extralocal politico-administrative environment'. In line with the idea of 'reflexive practitioner', Tennås Holmen (2013) has named those who hold vital in-between roles in governance networks as 'operative managers'. These individuals are centrally located amid network members, as well as between the network and public authorities. The Finnish FLAG case illuminates a setting where FLAG managers take important positions in different directions, across the FLAG managers' network and FLAG partnerships, as well as among public authorities and national sectoral communities (Salmi et al., 2020). We study whether and to what extent FLAG managers hold this kind of 'in-between' role in promoting local and external exchange and ask if FLAG managers' work strengthens expertise in place, the so-called vernacular expertise (Lowe et al., 2019). Lowe et al. (2019, p. 32) describe vernacular expertise as holding '... inextricable mixture of the local and the universal, the natural and the

social, as well as the blending of scientific, political-managerial and local knowledge forms ... within participatory resource management.'

Fisheries governance in the EU, as an archetypal science-based top-down system, begs the question as to whether the FLAGs and the vernacular expertise supported by FLAG managers can help in building bridges towards neo-endogenous approaches that connect the governance system and system to be governed. Particularly in the EU, fisheries governance is suffering from a narrow focus on the techno-scientific aspects of managing fisheries. Can FLAGs and their managers help restore the lost value-rational 'phronetic' dimension, i.e., the possession and exertion of practical wisdom (Linke & Jentoft, 2014) in fisheries governance?

METHODS AND MATERIAL

Mainly qualitative mixed methods are used for the analysis of the Finnish FLAG system and its objectives, the intermediary role of FLAG managers and the FLAG networks and partnerships. The initial analysis utilises empirical material results obtained from a multilevel comparative study with a vertical and horizontal approach on EU priorities, national and local goals, and the implementation of the FLAG system (Salmi et al., 2020), which is followed by an analysis of the role of FLAG managers and the importance of networking in enhancing the fishing livelihood.

The core material originates from structured in-depth interviews conducted with FLAG managers ($N = 9$) in 2019 and 2020 (Salmi et al., 2020). These data are supplemented by data obtained from structured telephone interviews held in 2022 with seven FLAG managers. These interviews deepen our understanding of the partnerships and networks supporting the FLAG system, as well as the significance of the FLAG managers' role within the Finnish fisheries' sector development. In addition, the Finnish Geographical Expert of FARNET (2014–2020), the EU's Fisheries Areas Network, was interviewed and contributed material on the FLAG managers' credibility and recruitment processes.

To present the findings on the implementation of the Finnish FLAG system, we use material collected by an internet questionnaire survey on the national fisheries governance situation answered by fisheries sector key stakeholders, organisations, national fisheries authorities and fisheries entrepreneurs ($N = 253$) and telephone interview material that focuses on the commercial fishers' views on the FLAG system ($N = 28$). Moreover, the next section (4) is partly based on FLAG managers' self-evaluation surveys ($N = 9$) on their group's achievement of set goals. This material was collected by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry.

The vertical comparative approach, which is presented in the fourth section and stretches from EU-, national- and local levels, is based on the empirical EMFF assessment material (2014–2020) and analysed against the Finnish national programme and the FLAG managers' self-evaluation surveys. Moreover, we compare the multilevel (EU and national) aims with FLAGs' outcomes to better understand the challenges and the benefits of the implementation of the FLAG system and how the FLAG system fits within diverse local settings. In the fifth section, we appraise the partnerships and networks that have been created for reaching FLAG goals by asking, on the basis of supplementing interviews, how co-governance interactions (Kooiman, 2003) may support the broadening of sectoral development towards more inclusive approaches that could potentially secure the adaptability of small-scale fisheries.

In the fifth and sixth sections, we focus particularly on the role of the FLAG manager, who is positioned at the intersection of both vertical and horizontal interactions. The horizontal interactions are the FLAG system's main vehicles for development and are importantly supported by the

horizontal networks. To achieve this aim, first, we use and assess data collected from the FLAG managers' in-depth interviews held from 2019 to 2020 (Salmi et al., 2020) and the updated interviews held in 2022. The aim of the interviews was to examine the role of the FLAG managers in enhancing exchange and mobilising local capacities. Second, we collect material on the FLAGS' external networks, both national and international, and on the FLAGS' most important collaborators and partner groups in supplementing FLAG manager interviews. In addition, the authors of this article participated in the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry's two-day FLAG programming preparation workshop for the 2021–2027 period (in Asikkala 2020), in which FLAG managers were the main participants. This opportunity for participatory observation deepened our understanding of FLAG managers' expertise, collaboration and devoted commitment to the development of the fisheries sector.

VARIETY OF GOALS IN IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FLAG INITIATIVE

In addition to the local goals of LDSs, there are also higher-level objectives and frameworks that shape the implementation of the FLAG system. The EU has defined priorities for FLAG funding, and in Finland, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry has published national goals. Comparing the goals at different levels and studying their practical implementation enable us to evaluate the local compatibility of the wider FLAG and CLLD approaches and whether and how the wider FLAG setting leads to local benefits. Moreover, this approach opens possibilities for evaluating local adaptability, the importance of networks and the intermediary roles of FLAG managers.

EU priorities and FLAG operations

The EMFF of the EU has set union priorities (UPs) where FLAG funding can be used to achieve the following goals related to (1) adding value, including adding value to local fisheries products; (2) diversifying the fisheries activities into other sectors; (3) sociocultural aspects, including promoting social well-being and cultural heritage; (4) environmental aspects, including operations to mitigate climate change; and (5) governance, including reinforcing the role of fishing communities. In their study of FLAG-funded projects in eight member states (Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Poland and Sweden), Miret-Pastor et al. (2020) find that the major themes were, on average, the diversification (32.7% of the total sum funded) and sociocultural aspects (30%). Adding value (26.2%) was also a generally important goal for the projects, while the environmental (10.3%) and governance (0.5%) aspects were less popular.

Adding value

The first UP, adding value, is a goal that is commonly stressed in the LDSs of the Finnish FLAGS, as well as in the national goals set for the FLAG system. Early in the programming period, all FLAGS were asked by FARNET about the importance of the various UPs, and 85% stated that adding value was a high priority (Miret-Pastor et al., 2020). Adding value was identified by the Finnish FLAGS as the most important UP. Miret-Pastor et al. (2020) show that 78 of 165 Finnish FLAG projects, representing 56.1% of the funding, can be classified as realising the added value target.

Adding value is a clear aim in projects that enhance the processing, marketing and distribution of fish. Among the Finnish FLAGs, these projects are typically seen as contributing to the national target of developing the local fisheries value chain. Fishing harbours and fish-processing facilities are important areas for this type of sectoral development.

As the impacts of grey seals and cormorants have diminished the landings, coastal small-scale fishers have been forced to add value to the catch by processing and marketing the products directly to consumers (Salmi, 2015). There is, however, a limit to raising the value of the products sold by the existing fishers. The major long-term problem for Finnish small-scale fishing is finding new entrants to the livelihood to replace the retiring fishers.

Diversification

The Finnish operational programme does not recognise diversification as a target for FLAGs. Neither is the term in frequent use in the 10 LDSs, although 15.5% of the FLAG project funding has been categorised within this UP (Miret-Pastor et al., 2020). FLAG projects may support diversification inside and outside fisheries. Inside fisheries, such support refers not only to the implementation of new strategies in fishing practices, gear, target species and areas but also to new paths in fisher families' fish processing, direct selling and other marketing and entrepreneurial activities (Freeman & Svells, 2022). Projects that realise these types of diversification mostly fall into the adding value category.

Regarding the diversification of fishing livelihood across sectoral borders, Finnish fisher households often combine their fishing activities with other occupations and income sources to reach a sufficient yearly income. This type of diversification, i.e., pluriactivity (Salmi, 2005), is an integral part of small-scale fisheries due to the seasonal nature of fishing activities, although fisheries stakeholders typically nurture the ideal of being full-time entrepreneurs. The Finnish FLAG projects have, however, rarely addressed the enhancement of profitable income combinations to enhance families' capacity to adapt to fluctuating fishing incomes.

Some of the Finnish FLAGs have funded tourism-related projects. For instance, the Eastern Finland FLAG has enhanced opportunities for fishing tourism together with local LEADER associations. In some FLAGs, tourism-related projects have developed opportunities for professional fishing guides, but the Finnish FLAGs have not funded projects for enhancing the diversification of the commercial fishers' livelihood towards tourism.

Environmental

The Finnish EMFF operational programme highlights that the FLAG system aims at strengthening the competitiveness, renewal and adaptation of the local fisheries' livelihoods; therefore, environmental issues are not at the centre. Nevertheless, Miret-Pastor et al. (2020) calculate that 18.7% of Finnish FLAG projects' funding falls into the environmental UP category. Such environmental projects are not typically included in the lists of LDSs' strategic goals, with the exception of one FLAG, namely, the Åland Islands, which has funded several watershed restoration projects.

The environmental theme is often an important element in funded projects. For instance, when projects promote the processing and use of underutilised fish species, they improve the environmental condition of the watershed, in addition to diversifying fishers' livelihood strategies and adding value to landings. The interviewed manager in the Central Finland FLAG highlighted

the FLAGS' promotion of the processing and use of underutilised fish species. He noted that this is a way to expand small-scale fishers' livelihood strategies, with a particularly environmentally friendly angle. Moreover, the Ostrobothnia FLAG has been working with a local Martha¹ association to promote the processing and human consumption of underutilised fish species. This innovative work has expanded through cooperation with recognised chefs in private restaurants, as well as school canteens.

Partly due to FLAGS' promotion work, the appreciation and use of underutilised fish species have seen a national revival in recent years. The environmental benefit of nutrient removal from the watershed is important, but there is also a wide agreement that the landings should be used for human or animal consumption. Studies related to fisheries certification systems have been carried out, e.g., with the support of the South Finland FLAG and the Eastern Finland FLAG.

Sociocultural

Sociocultural UPs have been defined as promoting social well-being and cultural heritage in fisheries and aquaculture areas (Miret-Pastor et al., 2020). The goal that FLAGS should fund projects that prevent and solve conflicts, as listed in the Finnish EMFF operational programme, can be regarded as compatible with the idea of promoting social well-being. This especially applies to projects funded by coastal FLAGS that have aimed to mitigate grey seal-fisheries and cormorant-fisheries conflicts, which have supported continuation of the fishing livelihood while simultaneously securing better well-being locally.

The social and cultural dimensions are rarely mentioned in Finnish LDSs. This lack of appreciation reflects the focus on a more instrumental rationality in fisheries business enhancement that characterises many FLAGS. For example, one FLAG manager pointed out that funding cultural events in connection with local fisheries is not an appropriate use of funding. In another FLAG, the board early in the programming period of 2014–2020 stated that the project 'shall not look into the history, the goals should be set in the future'. Within some FLAGS, however, the cultural value of the fishing livelihood is seen as important, and the cultural aspect of fisheries and the related traditions have become core activities. Cross-sectoral cooperation, such as village activities that stimulate fisheries, heritage, locals and visitors alike, has been funded, e.g., by the Ostrobothnian FLAG and the Eastern Finland FLAG. Education and teaching of historical fishing techniques have been of interest, especially in the FLAGS of Bothnian Bay and Kainuu-Koillismaa.

Governance

Governance as a UP relates to strengthening the role of fisheries communities in local development and the governance of local fisheries resources and maritime activities (Miret-Pastor et al., 2020). The wider aim is to give fishers a voice in local decision-making and resource management and to raise the profile of fishers and producers in the community. Projects that fall into this category were nearly nonexistent in the comparison made by Miret-Pastor et al. (2020). On the other hand, projects that aim at improving collaboration—a goal for the FLAGS in the Finnish operational programme—may contribute to giving the marginalised fishers a louder voice in the decision-making system.

The Finnish FLAGS have funded numerous seminars, educational meetings and excursions where fishers, together with stakeholders, find opportunities to discuss how to affect the

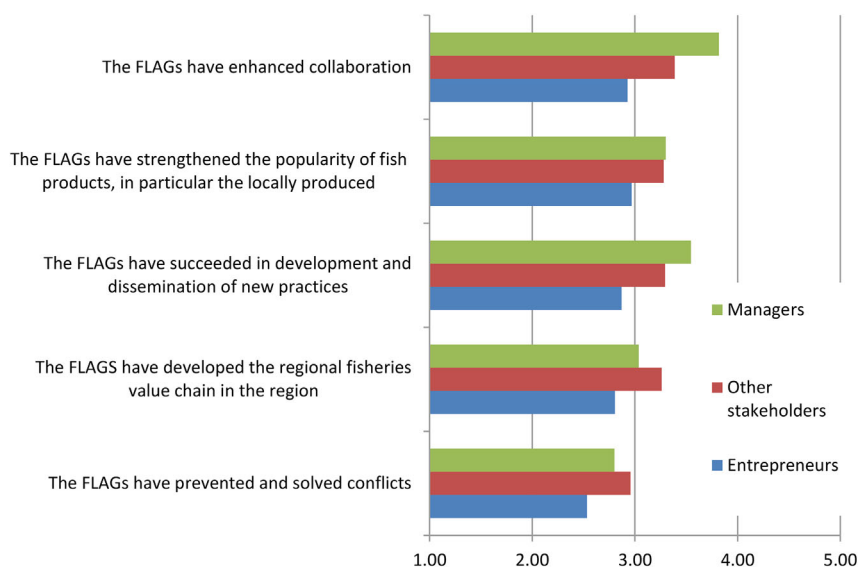


FIGURE 1 Stakeholders' perceptions of how the FLAGs have reached the five goals stated in the national operational programme displayed by average across three groups. 1 = fully disagree; 2 = somewhat disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = somewhat agree; 5 = fully agree. Here, the term 'managers' refers to fisheries' decision-makers and authorities. 'Other stakeholders' include representatives of nongovernmental organisations (in fisheries and environmental sectors), and 'entrepreneurs' refers to those with fisheries businesses and livelihoods (Salmi et al., 2020.)

development of the livelihood and local communities. Many FLAGs have funded projects that enhance the training of commercial fishers and the development of fish products and marketing systems. The development of fishing technology has been funded, especially in Lapland. In the coastal FLAGs, substantial effort and funding have been aimed at mitigating the losses faced by small-scale fishers due to the increased numbers of seals and cormorants. The strongest effort to raise fishers' voices to overcome the core problems in coastal fisheries has been made by the Baltic Sea Seal and Cormorant Transnational Cooperation (TNC) Project (Svels et al., 2019), which has been carried out by coastal FLAGs along many Baltic Sea countries.

National goals and local implementation

The main national development goals for the Finnish FLAGs during the 2014–2020 period were listed within the operational programme and included (1) the development of the local fisheries' value chain, (2) the development and dissemination of new practices and innovations, (3) the prevention and solving of conflicts, (4) the improvement of collaboration and (5) the strengthening of the popularity of local fish products (EC, 2014). A wide range of FLAG-funded projects have implemented these goals and sometimes even several of the goals in the same project.

According to our survey findings, compared to fishing entrepreneurs, fisheries managers (authorities and decision-makers) and other stakeholders more positively perceive that the FLAGs have reached their national targets (Figure 1). These differences may be connected to a lack of awareness of the FLAGs' activities among fishing industry stakeholders. The interviewed FLAG managers considered the lack of knowledge about the FLAG system both within the sector and

among the public to be a major challenge. One reason for the lack of knowledge may be that the FLAGs are relatively new organisations in the sector. A FLAG manager commented that ‘the FLAG is a new actor on the fisheries scene and brings new reasoning to the sector’. Another reason for the lack of awareness may be that the FLAGs no longer make decisions about investment subsidies for individual fishers, as they did during the 2007–2013 programming period. Thus, fishers may not come into contact with the FLAGs or see much benefit for their livelihood derived from this system, which funds cooperation projects for wider benefit. Further, in the structured telephone interviews, commercial fishers commented: ‘... the FLAG projects are often useful although they do not bring direct benefits’. They also noted that the FLAGs’ activities become moulded by the FLAG manager, whose role is central. While all fishers were not aware of the FLAGs, many knew the FLAG manager and the work he or she was doing.

Among stakeholders in general, the goal of enhancing collaboration was most often considered to have been reached, while the FLAGs’ role in preventing or solving conflicts was considered to be more modest (Figure 1). The respondents in the lake areas regarded FLAGs, in general, more positively than did those along the Baltic Sea coast. However, the opportunities developed by coastal FLAGs were widely seen to have been hampered due to the severe seal and cormorant-induced problems that commercial fishers have faced in the last 20–30 years (see Svells et al., 2019). One commercial fisher commented that the FLAGs ‘give hope for finding a technical solution to the seal problem, and to raise the value of catch and improve working safety’.

The specific objectives stated in the LDSs of each FLAG have served to more accurately tailor the funding to the local circumstances and needs. FLAGs’ development goals as stated in the LDSs are all different, although similar issues are often encountered. LDSs reflect regional needs and characteristics and have usually been contributed to by a large set of local stakeholders based on information obtained from local fisheries and SWOT analyses at the planning stage. The project selection process and criteria vary between FLAGs, but the core prerequisite is that the selected project should contribute to carrying out at least one of the FLAGs’ goals.

There has rarely been a need to revise the LDS documents during the programming period. Developing the circumstances and opportunities of commercial fishing is a common target in LDSs, but some FLAGs fund projects that support aquaculture as well. In many cases, fish farming entrepreneurs hold that the FLAGs promote fishers’ interests only. In some FLAGs, fishing tourism is mentioned in the LDS—and in some groups, it is even highlighted as a focus area—but as a rule, recreational fishing is not considered to belong to either the EMFF programme or the FLAG system.

INTERACTIONS IN THE FINNISH FLAG SYSTEM

Collaboration with stakeholders and organisations, including rural LAGs, is an important dimension of the institutional settings that affects FLAGs’ approaches. FLAG managers (in Finland called *activators*) are central figures in building partnerships, funding projects and helping fishers in the bureaucratic fisheries system.

The manager recruitment processes in Finland are planned and conducted individually by the local FLAG. A general rule for all FLAGs is, however, that the process should be open, and the call should be widely circulated. The decision-makers of a FLAG emphasise what are seen as the locally relevant capabilities for fulfilling the FLAG’s specific LDSs. It is typical that the call highlights skills and experience in the fisheries sector; however, expertise, e.g., in either tourism or entrepreneurship, has also been mentioned, together with personal capabilities for

active cooperation with people. The FLAG expert we interviewed noted that fisheries skills and prior experience with networking within fisheries fortifies managers' credibility, which helps their collaboration, especially with commercial fishers. In one call for a FLAG manager, 'fisheries credibility' was mentioned as a valued quality of the applicant. In practice, while not all new entrants are merited in regard to fisheries issues, novices tend to take advantage of the tightly communicating manager network where the more prominent managers help others with practical issues and give support for becoming familiar with their job. Newcomers entering from outside the sector must start by familiarising themselves with the fisheries industry and build their own social capital and network.

The intermediary role of the manager

The previous section shows how Finnish FLAGs have found a reasonable balance between local community needs and wider goals. The national implementation process has been flexible enough to secure sufficient local independence, with variations in FLAG-specific approaches stemming from contextual differences. FLAG managers have become pragmatic key players as mediators in these implementation processes.

Each FLAG usually employs one manager; however, in some larger groups, there can also be a part-time assistant or two managers. At the beginning of the programming period, the FLAG managers participate in crucial stakeholder involvement, and they assist with the drafting of LDSs. Furthermore, the FLAG manager's role is to prepare and introduce projects to FLAG board meetings. In several cases, the manager is the initiator and innovator of proposed projects. An interviewed FLAG manager commented on the managers' role in outlining the project proposals as follows: 'The amount of FLAG projects would be approximately one half without the help received at the proposal writing stage from the manager, who has the means for communication and knows the procedures and practices'.

A Finnish FLAG manager can be described as a 'jack-of-all-trades'. One manager illustrated their official and unofficial job description as follows:

In practice, the manager acts as the secretary for the FLAG, moves among actors, gives business advice on business development and profitability improvements, discusses development needs, directs needs into projects or directly takes development ideas from the field into practice. The manager coordinates various training sessions, seminars and study trips. Information on the chosen strategy, other financing possibilities and key actions affecting the fisheries sector is also part of the manager's working field. The manager also acts as a liaison for entrepreneurs facing the authorities.

One FLAG manager stressed that the most important FLAG-funded projects result from grassroots-level initiatives and stem from entrepreneurs' real-life challenges and development ideas, which is in line with the CLLD approach. When the local initiator has contacted the FLAG manager, the latter's expertise and networks will be launched in the proposal writing process. The manager is the central figure who moulds the project idea into a proposal format through discussions with the entrepreneurs, municipalities, regional fisheries administrators and other stakeholders.

One example of the FLAG manager's role is the minced roach project in Lapland. The manager of the Lapland FLAG noted that bycatches of roach had increased rapidly, and as there was

no market for roach, the landings were buried into the ground. The project initiative—with the idea of utilising the rich roach resources for human consumption by making a boneless mass for the preparation of fish fingers and balls—came from the fishers' cooperative. Fishers contacted the Lapland FLAG manager, who arranged meetings with the local municipality. The municipality was interested in providing local fish in their catering services and was ready to fund 10% of the project costs. The manager and fishers' cooperative also negotiated with the Finnish Food Authority to obtain permission for making the boneless mass in facilities owned by the municipality. Resting on the FLAG manager's established networks, local expertise and long experience in the project application process, the minced roach project was funded and carried out successfully. The project supported the local fish supply and the sustainable use of fish resources, added value to small-scale fishers' landings and was afterwards rewarded by the EU.

Many interviewed managers and commercial fishers pointed out that a direct benefit of FLAG managers' role is their support and advice to small-scale fishers and other actors in planning and making formal applications for investments. In many cases, fishers are not skilled in the data processing that is needed for writing and submitting applications. These tasks—while on the margin of the manager's official role—support the generation of new investments and bottom-up fishery activities that would not otherwise have been produced. The Lapland FLAG manager pointed out that he has been involved in all fisheries investment projects funded by the regional fisheries administration. He mentioned that 'fishers have difficulties in understanding the legal texts and need assistance in filling out the application by using the complex online system. Fishers call me because they rarely get sufficient help from the busy administrators. Thus, the role of the FLAG manager is crucial in securing investment funding for the fishers'.

Over the course of his or her everyday work, the FLAG manager connects commercial fishers to broader networks and enhances their awareness of opportunities provided by the FLAG system. In interviews, one manager described his role as an interpreter who translates between the national and local level actors, with the ministries and the fishers all speaking 'different languages': 'The manager is the interpreter, who speaks the language of the fishers, administration and ministry; the work involves pulling actors together'. In other words, 'The manager must have skills in the 'Brussels language', 'Helsinki language' and 'lake language'. However, they do not only speak; they also listen. FLAG managers hold vernacular expertise as a 'mixture of local and the universal, the natural and the social' (Lowe et al., 2019), but many of them emphasise how they particularly 'listen to the local voice'. One manager explained how important face-to-face discussions are for building personal contacts and trust that weave and strengthen networks that are essential for a FLAG's success.

Managers' personal attributes and professional backgrounds are of major importance for understanding the variation in the strategic focus of FLAGs. Managers' knowledge of the fisheries sector, together with their commitment and established networks, is one of the main reasons for the successful implementation of the FLAG system in Finland.

FLAG networks and partnerships

In interviews conducted in 2022, FLAG managers were asked to list the most important partners or networks that supported their FLAGs' performance during the previous programming period. These partners and networks are categorised in Table 1, and the most important categories are marked for each FLAG. Commercial fishers and aquaculture firms were the most common partners, i.e., either individual entrepreneurs or their cooperatives and other organisations. Fish

TABLE 1 Main types of partnerships and networks in Finnish FLAGs during the previous programming period.

FLAG	1. Archipelago Sea	2. Åland Islands	3. Bothnian Sea & Pyhäjärvi	4. Ostrobothnia	5. Central Finland	6. Eastern Finland	7. Lapland
Commercial fishers and aquaculture firms	X	X	X		X	X	X
Fishing tourism entrepreneurs and fishing guides		X				X	
Regional fisheries advisory organisations	X		X	X	X		
Regional fisheries administration	X	X					X
National fisheries administration: Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry							X
Shareholders' fishery associations		X		X			
Other FLAG managers and national FLAG manager network	X			X	X		X
Municipalities and development companies	X		X		X	X	X
Financing sector			X				
Educational institutions	X			X	X	X	
Research organisations	X		X	X		X	
Environmental sector including water protection associations		X				X	
Third-sector organisations		X		X	X		
Rural development (LAGs)		X			X		

farmers were mentioned more rarely than commercial fishers. In those FLAGs that operate along the Baltic Sea coast, the small-scale fishers, i.e., the coastal fishers, were noted as being at the core of the managers' network. However, one coastal FLAG highlighted that they also cooperate with large-scale open sea trawl fishers. Only two managers listed fishing tourism entrepreneurs and fishing guides as important FLAG partners.

Regional fisheries advisory organisations are important partners for most FLAGs, especially those along the coast. Advisory organisations are themselves often leaders of FLAG-funded projects. FLAGs also cooperate with regional and national fisheries administrations, but these are not always considered partners per se. In Finland, the relationship between FLAG managers and advisers of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the National fisheries administration for the EMFF (and EMFAF) is especially open and well appreciated among all actors. This relationship provides not only an open dialogue but also a short and quick channel to officials within the European Commission that handles the CFP.

Although shareholder associations operate at the most local level of fisheries' decision-making, they are not very commonly named as central partners. These associations, which collectively represent the interests of water owners, are often small and do not have sufficient resources for project management. Municipalities serve as core partners not only as providers of local funding but also through their support for project organisation. For instance, in the area of the Bothnian Sea and Lake Pyhäjärvi FLAG, municipalities serve as active partners and funding providers. The presence of municipalities within these FLAGs has varied over the years, often due to levels of pressure placed on municipality funding.

FLAG managers participate in a tight national manager network regarding the exchange of experiences, best practices and ideas. As one manager put it, 'the FLAG manager circle is the number one working partner'. Alongside the national FLAG manager network, managers participate in a wider network that binds those who implement the Finnish EMFF operational programme. International networks across European FLAGs and FARNET² were also mentioned as important, with managers highlighting collaboration with other European FLAGs in various projects. Finnish FLAG managers usually take part in organised seminars and training sessions organised by FARNET. Close contact between the Finnish FLAGs (via the managers), national authorities and FARNET has developed into an open forum of communication over the years. For example, interviewees described a meeting in 2020 where representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, FLAG managers and representatives from the national LEADER and rural LAG organisations jointly prepared guidelines for the coming Finnish EMFAF programming period (2021–2027).

The composition of FLAG networks is also a reflection of what kinds of organisations exist in the FLAG area; in this respect, FLAG managers bring with them knowledge of their local patch. Opportunities for innovating and carrying out various types of projects are especially good where FLAGs possess important regional educational or research organisations in their regions. In sparsely populated northern Finland, these organisations are much rarer compared to southern parts of the country. The role of educational organisations, together with commercial fishers, has been crucial in the successful FLAG-funded master-apprentice projects that have been conducted, especially in inland areas, to secure the continuity of fishing livelihoods. Predominantly within Finnish fisheries, commercial fishers are ageing; thus, there is a need to recruit and train young persons to learn the profession. After a local initiative by the Lapland FLAG, the manager's main tasks have become building the network and arranging funding for such a generational transition. In the areas of the Lapland FLAG and the Central Finland FLAG, for instance, several young fishers have picked up the profession, and the average age of commercial fishers has decreased. At the

same time, the projects have generated a new type of partnership between fisheries and regional vocational institutions.

FLAG managers have built networks with national research organisations and universities, which have led to novel interdisciplinary collaborations, including art and communication-based education. These fields have provided new terrain within which FLAGs can operate and gain visibility. FLAGs located along the coast and in lake areas have participated in networks that aim to developing the quality of fish products (the Blue Products Project, which belongs to the national strategic fisheries innovation programme), alternative fishing technologies and seal deterrents. These projects are typically funded by EMFF and other public sources; in some cases, they are fostered by municipalities' development company partnerships.

In the Baltic Sea Seal and Cormorant TNC project, which was initiated by FLAG managers in 2017 (Svels et al., 2019), FLAG managers from Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Poland and Estonia collaborated with a research institution (Natural Resources Institute Finland, Luke). The aim of the project was to raise awareness of the coastal fishers' severe problems, especially at the political level, supported by producing accurate knowledge about the fishers' situation. This project supported the creation of a new international network between FLAGs, especially between FLAG managers. Many FLAG managers also participated in conducting interviews with fishers that were used as material for the Luke Report (Svels et al., 2019).

Environmental issues are present in many projects. Interviewed FLAG managers, however, rarely listed partners in the environmental sector as being the most central. Two managers considered collaboration with third-sector actors in 'sustainability projects', such as the abovementioned Martha Organisation, to be important. Finally, two FLAG managers listed LAGs as the main partner organisations.

FLAGs' interplay with LAGs

Across Finland, a total of 54 Finnish LAGs operated to enhance CLLD in the 2014–2020 programming period, with CLLD being considered a central instrument for rural development and rural policy in Finland (Jänis, 2018). The FLAG system makes use of the experiences and development of CLLD generated through the LEADER initiative, with FLAG and LAG manager expertise exchange being central to shared learning. In addition to rural LAGs providing a 'model system' of CLLD for implementation in the field of fisheries, practical partnerships with LAGs support FLAGs' local operation in several ways.

Although FLAGs remain relatively autonomous in Finland, through their connections with rural LEADER LAGs, they gain from wider networks of rural development. All the FLAG managers interviewed found collaboration with the rural LAGs to be useful, synergetic and supportive of FLAGs' bureaucratic challenges. Such a pragmatic partnership is made concrete through the FLAGs' administration, as Finnish FLAGs are required to be administratively linked with a local LEADER group (known as the 'home LAG'). This cross-sectoral connection is mostly noticed in the performance of shared administrative support, expenses, staff and offices. At the local level, bridging between FLAGs and rural LEADER LAGs contributes to the shared peer auditing of projects, the evaluation of results and the dissemination of new ideas and contacts.

However, major differences exist in the extent and content of FLAGs' networking and collaboration with LAGs. Although each FLAG is administratively linked with its home LAG, they typically cover a wider geographical area, and some actively collaborate with other LAGs in their area. For example, the Eastern Finland FLAG engages with 11 LAGs in its area. The large number of LAGs

within one FLAG area poses challenges for communication and collaboration. However, in Eastern Finland, the FLAG and LAGs have managed many key FLAG-funded projects, including a master-apprentice project and a development project for safer fishing gear for the endangered Saimaa ringed seal. Within the Ostrobothnia FLAG, the home LAG of Aktion Österbotten manages the Blue Products Project. FLAG managers mentioned that the need for collaboration with the LAGs is often related to the enhancement of rural tourism, particularly fishing tourism and guiding systems. Here, the expertise of the FLAG managers is important and commonly utilised, although the projects are usually funded and managed within the rural LAG framework. Fishing tourism projects also catalyse international cooperation and projects, such as projects carried out across the Åland Island FLAG and FLAGs located in Sweden.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we analyse the mechanisms through which EU and national goals are differentiated and adapted to local fishery settings through FLAG-funded projects and via the expertise of FLAG managers. The study shows multiple benefits that the FLAGs' activities create for small-scale commercial fisheries. At the same time, the study recognises the marked contextual differences between the FLAG approaches, networks and outcomes. This variety is derived from the local circumstances and the emphases and goals of people who participate in outlining and implementing the LDSs. A comparison between EU priorities, national goals and local strategic goals reveals the adaptability and flexibility of the Finnish FLAG system. Although local FLAG approaches are partly influenced by the wider goals, they are mainly defined by the local settings, problems and needs. Our findings show that the expertise and background of a FLAG manager are often a core determinant of this differentiated approach and the catalyst for building FLAG's partnerships and networks.

Approaches for development and democracy

The implementation of the FLAG system can be seen as an important step towards taking local communities and sociocultural dimensions as assets in public fisheries development. However, although some Finnish FLAGs embrace goals related to social well-being, cultural heritage and strengthening the role of fisheries communities in their LDSs, in general, these issues have received a minor amount of attention. This may be explained by the wide-ranging ethos in Finnish fisheries that places weight on economic, technological and ecological issues rather than social and cultural issues. Additionally, FLAG managers' opinions were divided regarding the need for strengthening the sociocultural approach, in balance with sector-based development, along the course of the newly launched programming period.

The Finnish FLAG system appears to have found a reasonable balance between local community needs and wider goals. We find that the Finnish FLAG system emphasises the development of the fisheries sector, and many FLAGs make use of territorial partnerships, such as those with third-sector organisations and rural LAGs, to catalyse wider benefits of CLLD. FLAGs benefit local fisheries directly and pragmatically when fishers' specific problems are listened to, and fishers are being helped by FLAG managers and funded projects. However, through a more cross-sectoral approach, the FLAGs can contribute to building networks, ideas and partnerships that help catalyse learning, new practices and collaboration that support the local community and

fishing livelihood. At best, these partnerships harness wide spheres of local people, institutions and LEADER associations.

Somewhat surprisingly, rural LAGs were not often listed by interviewed FLAG managers as major partners, although all FLAGs noted cooperating with at least one LAG. While the LAGs enhance local democracy and the involvement of citizens, most Finnish FLAGs place more emphasis on the livelihood of fisheries. Although the participation of fishers and other stakeholders is seen as important in FLAG boards and beyond, participation is considered an instrument for locally based fisheries development rather than a way to further local democracy, which is a natural component of the FLAG and home LAG relationship.

By acknowledging the 'paradoxes of participation' (Pineiro-Antelo et al., 2019), it is not self-evident that just increasing the level of participation would lead to the better inclusion of local community and fisheries concerns. In the Finnish case, FLAG managers can be seen as mediators who support local inclusion. As a result of a comparative analysis, Bugeja-Said et al. (2022) conclude that the Finnish FLAG system shows a balanced and right type of local autonomy integrated with close monitoring and support by authorities. The results of this article confirm that most of the Finnish FLAGs found a reasonable balance between local community needs and wider goals during the programming period between 2014 and 2020.

The adaptation of the FLAG system to the Finnish fisheries system depends on many factors, not the least of which is the wider framework set by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. Local actors have been largely successful in implementing and tailoring the FLAG approach within this framework. In addition to the expertise of the FLAG managers in mediating these factors and those of other influential actors in the network, FLAG strategies and activities also depend on local institutional settings and circumstances. For instance, the existence of educational or research organisations affects FLAGs' opportunities for funding projects for fisheries enhancement and recruitment of young commercial fishers.

Managers as reflexive practitioners

Our findings show how the Finnish implementation of the FLAG system illuminates a setting in which many FLAG managers have taken central positions in the governing interactions through networks and partnerships. Positioned at the intersection between horizontal and vertical networks, managers can be characterised as 'reflexive practitioners' (Ray, 2006) who catalyse local action and mediate between the local territorial unit and the extralocal politico-administrative environment. In line with Ray, the successful local operators' '... catalytic effect occurs through the interpersonal contagion of emotional intelligence, encouraging people to participate in the local development dynamic, offering, for example, ideas of how individuals and groups might initiate local social change' (Ray, 2006, p. 288). As explained earlier, most of the Finnish FLAG managers portray this type of capability and social capital that has accumulated over time. They are emotionally committed to the fisheries sector and its development at the grassroots level. Often, this dedicated work in favour of the fisheries sector can be described as a personal calling. The managers' emotional commitment to local development has resonated with the long-lasting general void in local support for small-scale fisheries in Finland (Salmi et al., 2022). The FLAGs and their managers have been equipped to fill that void. Thus, we can conclude that managers help restore the value-rational *phronetic* dimension in fisheries governance. Managers' tight and wide social contacts, personal relationships and mutual trust all work to strengthen the partnerships that are necessary for FLAGs' success.

The results reflect the benefits of the Finnish FLAGs' roles as neo-endogenous intermediaries, deriving from the FLAG managers' input and the development projects decided by the FLAGs. Through the combination of the FLAG and rural LAG networks, new ideas and experiences can move quickly from place to place. Continuous support from the home LAG is necessary, as is a successively conscious action to accumulate the FLAG managers' social capital, knowledge, experience and internal and external networks so that the FLAG 'tool kit' can be transferred onwards to the next generations of FLAG managers.

In the Finnish case, FLAG managers have become local ears and eyes that mediate feedback and build bridges between fishers, authorities, researchers and other stakeholders. Without the managers' social capital and work assisting the commercial fishers in applying for investment funding, the fishing livelihood would become further marginalised. At the same time, while interacting with the fishers, the FLAG managers can efficiently pass information regarding fishers' situations and problems on to the administration, which is an example of committed working beyond what is officially needed. Although the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry has a central role in administering the Finnish FLAG system from above, the FLAGs, and in particular their managers, help to restructure public intervention in favour of local territories and cultures (see Ray, 2006).

Via the intermediary role, the (vernacular) expertise, commitment and networking approach, the FLAG system, and especially the FLAG managers, are able to mend the failures of the governance system by helping adapt it to the system to be governed. The FLAG managers promote value-rational local and external exchange of knowledge and expertise that has been lacking in Finnish fisheries since its turn towards a hierarchical science-based governance system. The Finnish FLAG system, and the importance it places on fisheries-oriented goals and FLAG managers' work, gives hope for the marginalised commercial small-scale fishing livelihood (Salmi & Mellanoura, 2020) by filling a gap in the institutional support of small-scale fisheries. However, in another type of setting, the appropriate role of the FLAG manager may differ substantially. For instance, challenges related to fitting the FLAG system with the to-be-governed system may become different in the presence of strong fisher organisations, such as the *cofradías* in Spain (García-Lorenzo et al., in press). Instead of filling the void of local fisheries' development, as seen in Finland, many FLAGs in Spain struggle to find a balance with the existing experienced organisations. In Greece, small-scale fishers feel marginalised and lack trust in the fisheries governance system, which hinders their involvement in the FLAGs and thus decreases the benefits of the related projects (Bugeja-Said et al., 2022). Our conclusion derived from the Finnish case is that the recruitment of the right type of FLAG managers—reflexive practitioners who are capable of gaining 'fisheries credibility' among the fisher community and active interaction with local stakeholders and the various levels of the governance system—can serve as a path towards the inclusion of local small-scale fishers in a well-functioning FLAG system.

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ENDNOTES

¹The Martha Organisation is a Finnish home economics organization, founded in 1899 to promote well-being and quality of life in the home. It provides cultural and civic education and engages in advocacy work in Finland.

²Network of people implementing community-led local development (CLLD) under the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF).

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Both authors of this work contributed significantly to its preparation and development.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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