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Fisheries local action groups, small-scale fisheries and territorial development

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Abstract

In comparison to the wealth of critical evaluation of LEADER (i.e., *Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale*), there has been no consolidated attempt to reflect on the contribution of Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs), now entering their third EU programming period. Set up in the image of LEADER, and a novel governance instrument within the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), FLAGs aim to activate local responses that build resilience and adaptability within the fisheries sector and wider communities. In addition to introducing the accompanying articles that make up this special issue of *Sociologia Ruralis*, our article gives an account of the emergence of community-led local development (CLLD) in fisheries and the attributes that have characterised the application of the LEADER approach within a fisheries-territorial development context. In many cases, FLAGs have led to improved relationships between the small-scale fishing sector and wider local social and economic networks, helping the sector reimagine its role within local economies. Yet outcomes vary as the FLAG approach has been applied across different cultural and institutional settings. There are indications that the system is becoming enveloped by

wider priorities of coastal development and blue growth. Yet FLAGs may well provide a successful test case for widening participation in the CFP and upscaling integration of the fishing industry within local and regional economies. For CLLD in general, they are a reminder of the value of a differentiated CLLD approach tailored to different sectoral-territorial contexts.

KEYWORDS
blue growth, community-led local development (CLLD), FLAG, LEADER, small-scale fisheries, territorial development

INTRODUCTION—SETTING THE SCENE

Over the past 30 years, the social dimension of fisheries and fisheries policy in Europe has received increasing attention, both in scholarly and management circles. The imperative is now well-established for social scientists to explore and address the sociocultural, political, technological and economic transformations that continue to shape coastal and small-scale fisheries. Fisheries governance has, throughout this period, become a central focus of this research field (Arbo et al., 2018; Bavinck & Verrips, 2020; Kooiman et al., 2005; Urquhart et al., 2014). A spotlight has been drawn to the systemic challenges facing the EU's Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), as a governing system encumbered by its top-down, exogenous modes of working, and the resulting remoteness from the social institutions and values of coastal fishers and fishing communities (Symes et al., 2015).

Much of this focus on fisheries governance has been on the objectives and workings of the CFP's conservation pillar, whether it be the operation of resource management and regulatory systems (Penas Lado, 2016; Symes, 2023), efforts to regionalise or introduce more participatory approaches (Linke & Bruckmeier, 2015) or implications for the precarity of small-scale and coastal fisheries (Percy & O'Riordan, 2020, Raakjær & Hegland, 2012). Social concerns and impacts have typically been considered less visible (Penas Lado, 2016) and treated as an externality to be tackled elsewhere, if at all (Symes & Phillipson, 2009). They have 'fallen into the gap' between fisheries policy and general welfare or regional development programmes less accustomed to, or concerned with, the fishing sector and the wellbeing of fishers. In turn, the fishing industry itself has been viewed as isolated and largely disconnected from local economies, implying reduced opportunities for local added value or diversification and exposure to the wider shifts in distant markets and supply chains (Evans et al., 2023; Schreiber et al., 2020).

For Symes (2023, p. 96), the 'elusive social dimension' of fisheries is hidden in the contents of funding support for the industry within the CFP's Structural Policy, with the real breakthrough coming in 2007 through Axis 4 of the European Fisheries Fund (EFF) that centred on the sustainable development of fisheries dependent areas. The EFF had followed several iterations of structural policy programmes impacting fisheries, beginning with the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund in the 1970s and then successive waves of the Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance (FIFG). Despite the lack of integration with the conservation pillar of the CFP and efforts to reduce fishing capacity, the weight of these earlier programmes had focused heavily on

infrastructure, vessel construction and modernisation. FIFG II (2000–2006) would also fund modest 'socioeconomic measures' on early retirement, small-scale fishing enterprises and innovation.

Taking a significant step forward from these previous programmes, the EFF's Axis 4 initiated the creation and eventual rollout of Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs) across the EU. Their general aim was from the start, through local initiatives, to increase employment and territorial cohesion in coastal and inland fisheries areas. The FLAG approach would be carried forward and adapted in the succeeding programming periods of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF, 2014–2020) and, with broadened priorities for blue growth,[1] the current European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF, 2021–2027). FLAGs were set up in the image of LEADER[2] (i.e., *Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale*) Local Action Groups (LAGs), through a community-led local development (CLLD) approach aimed at capitalising on the endogenous potential of rural areas (cf. Ray, 2000). They were tasked with exploiting opportunities and addressing needs at the interface between the fisheries sector and territorial development through integrated local area strategies. In other words, FLAGs aimed at navigating a so-called 'middle way' between these previously detached domains of sectoral and territorial development (Phillipson & Symes, 2015). They were hence positioned at the crux of the challenge of activating local responses that build resilience and adaptability within the fisheries sector in combination with ~~the~~ wider communities.

When established, the FLAG system represented a potentially novel opportunity for the development of the sector, in particular for small-scale fisheries and their surrounding communities. The resources available were modest and unlikely to address major structural or developmental challenges for coastal and inland water communities. However, the new initiative offered a significant promise for adding value by 'reorienting development around local resources and by setting up structures to sustain the local development momentum' (Ray, 2000a, p. 166). By bringing the idea of a neo-endogenous, community-based approach (cf. Ray, 2000b) to a fisheries management context steeped in a culture of hierarchical governance and sectoral management, FLAGs bore the hope of a governance innovation that could consolidate the status of small-scale fisheries and forge closer relationships and co-operation with local economies and environmental concerns. In contrast to the hierarchical top-down science-based decision-making that is at the core of the CFP, FLAGs can be considered as an alternative instrument of fisheries governance, based on an appreciation of the benefits of wider participation, collaboration and local involvement (Salmi et al., 2022).

Yet, in comparison to the wealth of critical analysis and evaluation of LEADER and LAGs, there has been no consolidated attempt to reflect on the contribution, outcomes and learnings from the FLAG experience(s), now several years into their activities. Many questions remain: What have been their overall strengths and weaknesses and who have been the principal beneficiaries? How has the approach been applied in different local settings and filtered through different institutional contexts? What has been the added value locally or impacts on the status of small-scale fisheries? How effective and durable have the partnerships been in supporting participation and generating synergies across fisheries and other local development initiatives? Have FLAGs lived up to their potential of nurturing the social dimension of fisheries policy and the social sustainability of coastal fishing communities? Are there learnings from FLAGs for wider approaches to CLLD?

This article, and the accompanying collection of articles that it introduces, goes some way to filling this gap in the literature, by pulling together emerging research on FLAGs and how they work to the benefit of local fisheries and their communities. An overarching aim of the collection is to explore experiences of how the FLAG approach is being, or can be further, used to develop

small-scale coastal and inland fisheries as part of a combined territorial-sectoral approach—and what kinds of frictions appear within this ideally synergistic local development agenda. In a previous article published in *Sociologia Ruralis*, focusing on the first FLAG programming period (2007–2013), Phillipson and Symes (2015, pp. 356–357) noted that as 'the Leader experience has shown, forging local community partnerships and demonstrating tangible benefits takes time, and FLAGs are only at the outset of establishing wholly new constituencies of interests'. Now, with the third programming period well underway, it is timely to take stock of the implementation and functionality of the FLAG system and distil lessons about its challenges and successes in supporting small-scale fisheries and their communities through local partnerships.

In the next section, we provide an account of the emergence of CLLD in fisheries. We then explore the particular attributes that have characterised the application of the LEADER approach within the fisheries-territorial development context. Finally, after closing reflections, we introduce the article contributions that make up this special issue.

TOWARDS CLLD IN FISHERIES

Based on a local endogenous model of development and the LEADER ideology, implying a focus on bottom-up, participative, community-based methods, the implementation of Axis 4 and FLAGs through the EFF in the realm of fisheries and their communities represented the first thematic extension of this approach. This first programming period to implement the FLAG initiative (2007–2013) focussed on enhancing the coupled socioeconomic and socio-ecological aspects of sustainable development in fisheries areas in combination with territorial development, with a key objective being to support areas affected by the restructuring of the fisheries sector.

At this time, LEADER had already built a successful track record in strengthening capacity for locally driven development, capitalising on the endogenous potential of rural areas and communities. It had a significant history that had seen it evolve from a Community Initiative in the 1990s financed directly by the European Commission (Ray, 2000), to expanding its range and geographical coverage of rural areas. From 2007 onwards, in its fourth programming period, the 'LEADER approach' became 'mainstreamed' as an integrated and compulsory feature of Rural Development Programmes funded by the European Agriculture Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). Coinciding with and adopting this mainstreaming process, the FLAG approach was similarly embedded via Axis 4 across the EFF and subsequent programmes. Whilst their application was not mandatory, and it took a couple of years to establish the first FLAGs, over 300 were established across 21 member states (Linke & Bruckmeier, 2015) (Table 1). Member states would introduce FLAGs at varying pace, with an emphasis at this early stage on fisheries administrations and local actors learning the approach, building relationships and piloting projects.

In 2014, the 'LEADER approach' was again expanded, extending from rural and fisheries areas to urban contexts. This meant that it was now available under multiple European funds, including EMFF, EAFRD, European Social Fund (ESF) and European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The concept of 'CLLD' was now formally used to denote this widened field of application. During this period (2014 onwards), member states were also able to put in place arrangements for LAGs (which could be rural, fisheries or urban) to deliver single, integrated local development strategies using combinations of multiple funds to integrate local needs and strengthen connections between rural, urban and fisheries areas.

Couched in broadly socioeconomic terms (Symes, 2023), the priority for FLAGs under the EMFF (2014–2020) was to strengthen employment and territorial cohesion by boosting

TABLE 1 Principles and objectives of the FLAG system in three programming periods.

Programming period	European Fisheries Fund (EFF): 2007–2013 (Axis 4)	European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF): 2014–2020 (community-led local development [CLLD])	European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF): 2021–2027 (CLLD)
Number of FLAGs in operation	312	368 (including 19 UK FLAGs)	Not yet available
Main focus	Sustainable development of fisheries areas	Increasing employment and territorial cohesion	Helping coastal communities to benefit from sustainable blue economy
Key articles	**Art. 43.2 of the EFF Regulation (1198/2006) Objectives**: • maintain the economic and social prosperity of fisheries areas and add value to fisheries and aquaculture products • maintain and develop jobs through diversification or economic and social restructuring of areas facing socioeconomic difficulties as a result of changes in the fisheries sector • promote the quality of the coastal environment • promote national and transnational co-operation between fisheries areas	**Art. 6 of the EMFF Regulation (508/2014) Specific objective**: Promotion of economic growth, social inclusion and job creation, providing support to employability and labour mobility **EMFF Art. 63.1**: Five objectives/types of projects: 1. adding value 2. diversification 3. environment 4. sociocultural 5. governance	**EMFAF Regulation (2021/1139), Art. 29**: **Specific objective**: 'Interventions that contribute to enabling a sustainable blue economy in coastal, island and inland areas, and to fostering the development of fishing and aquaculture communities' **Art. 30**: 'the CLLD strategies … shall ensure that communities in fishing or aquaculture areas better exploit and benefit from the opportunities offered by the sustainable blue economy, capitalising on and strengthening environmental, cultural, social and human resources. Those CLLD strategies may range from those which focus on fisheries or aquaculture to broader strategies directed at the diversification of local communities'

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Programming period	European Fisheries Fund (EFF): 2007–2013 (Axis 4)	European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF): 2014–2020 (community-led local development [CLLD])	European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF): 2021–2027 (CLLD)
Definition of areas	**Art. 43.3 and 43.4**: Areas smaller than Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) 3 and coherent from a geographic, economic and social point of view. Priority should be given to areas with: –low population density, or –fishing in decline or –small fisheries communities	**CPR (Regulation 1303/2013) Art. 32.2 and 33.6**: Focus on specific subregional areas—between 10,000 and 150,000 inhabitants **EMFF Art. 3** Definitions: Fisheries and aquaculture area: –sea, river, lake shore, ponds, river basin –significant level of employment in fisheries or aquaculture –functionally coherent	**CPR (Regulation 2021/1060) Art. 31.2(a)**: Focus on subregional areas, that is, no population limits No definition of fisheries and aquaculture areas **EMFAF Art. 2**: Definition of sustainable blue economy: –all sectoral and cross-sectoral economic activities –relating to oceans, seas, coasts and inland waters –emerging sectors and non-market goods and services –environmental, social and economic sustainability
Composition of partnerships	**Art. 45**: Representing public and private partners from the various local relevant socioeconomic sectors and, according to the principle of proportionality, with adequate administrative and financial capacity to administer the assistance and ensure that the operations are completed successfully. The group should, whenever possible, be based on existing experienced organisations	**EMFF Art. 60**: 'maximise the participation of fishery and aquaculture sectors in the sustainable development' **CPR Art. 32.2**: Representatives of public and private local socioeconomic interests—at decision-making neither public authorities nor any single interest group represents more than 49% of voting rights	No such provision on participation of fishery and aquaculture sectors **CPR Art. 31.2(b)**: Representatives of public and private local socioeconomic interests—no single interest group controls the decision-making

small-scale fisheries' social, economic and environmental assets. During this period, 20 member states decided to use CLLD under the fisheries fund, while those that did not were mostly landlocked countries with only a very small allocation of the EMFF funding. Attention increasingly turned to consolidating the FLAGs and refining their *modus operandi*. Member states allocated on average 12% of their total EMFF budget to the CLLD approach. At the end of the programming period in 2020, there were close to 350 FLAGs in 19 member states, with an average budget of EUR 1.9 million[3] (Table 1). Almost 100 of these FLAGs were multi-funded, using—in addition to the EMFF—mainly the EAFRD, but also occasionally funding from the ERDF and/or ESF.

Whilst integration of funding mechanisms and the mainstreaming of the 'LEADER approach' in the delivery of programme priorities allowed the reach of CLLD to grow and funds to be used to add value to one another, it also brought added bureaucratic complexity and burdens. Concerns grew that the innovative, bottom-up, flexible and integrated philosophy of the neo-endogenous 'LEADER approach' was becoming diminished. Moreover, in the straightened economic climate, attention would often turn to the costs of facilitating LAG activities, despite commentators seeing this animation as a core innovation and source of vital capacity building. Furthermore, the limitations of traditional evaluation approaches in capturing their full qualitative benefits became increasingly obvious. As Breslow discusses, such limitations result from dominant discourses that act to suppress 'alternative interpretations and actions' related to small-scale enterprises and local actors (Breslow, 2015, p. 423).

In light of these developments, we see that the FLAG system was not born and developed in isolation. It originated at a time when the LEADER and CLLD approach was itself facing transformation and exposed to emerging opportunities and risks, which would also frame the parameters and action space of the FLAGs. CLLD in general would make greater headway where there was experience and capacity building in place, both at programme level and on the ground. CLLD demands alternative methods of deploying EU funding, multilevel decision-making and local animation to encourage community participation. These basic requirements are vital if CLLD is to support and involve less easy-to-reach target groups (such as small-scale fishers) and lead to higher quality and locally beneficial projects. However, the requirements presented complications when managing authorities attempted to apply the same rules and procedures to CLLD that are used in mainstream funding mechanisms. Just as the LEADER LAGs needed to become established in contexts with differing capacities and traditions of CLLD, FLAGs similarly had to develop within the constraints and processes of the operational programmes in which they were set, but in their case, these programmes were steeped in a particular institutional legacy of hierarchical and sectorally focussed policies like the CFP.

Throughout what is still a relatively short lifespan (2007 until today), FLAGs have therefore needed to navigate the evolving priorities of different funding programmes, as well as an increasingly integrated, multi-funding landscape. This challenge has taken on even greater significance for the current 2021–2027 EMFAF programming period and the shift in strategic focus to the development of a sustainable blue economy (Table 1). Thus, according to the EMFAF Regulation, 'CLLD strategies should ensure that local communities in fishing and aquaculture areas better exploit and benefit from the opportunities offered by the sustainable blue economy', with every local partnership 'ensuring a balanced involvement and representation of all relevant stakeholders from the local sustainable blue economy' (Regulation (EU) 2021/1139, Recital (44)). With the FLAG selection process for the 2021–2027 period in most member states due to be finalised late in 2023,[4] it remains to be seen just how fundamental a change this signifies for the FLAG system, whether it will lead to synergistic opportunities between fisheries, the wider blue economy and territorial development, and what this would mean for small-scale fisheries.

Taking into account the view of many local stakeholders that LEADER and CLLD had become excessively complicated (largely due to regulations at the member state level), the European Commission, when designing the 2021–2027 legislation, has given more flexibility to managing authorities in designing implementation systems. It is not clear to what extent this flexibility will translate into less restrictive rules at the local level. Despite the Commission's efforts to facilitate the integration of different EU funds in CLLD, some member states have opted to withdraw from the use of EMFAF in multi-funding arrangements. Yet, significantly, the broadened scope of EMFAF and member state flexibility now allows for LAGs to be created entirely around a blue economy imperative.

Also coinciding with this increased flexibility and broadened focus is the disappearance from the legislation of the 'FLAG' terminology. Since the provisions of the EMFAF regulation concerning CLLD have been greatly simplified, the rules concerning CLLD are now exclusively described in a common regulation applicable to all EU Funds (the Common Provisions Regulation), which uses the generic term LAG. In fact, the term FLAG had only become officially recognised in the EMFF regulation. Previously, under the EFF, the 'FLAG' nomenclature was adopted and promulgated by the European Fisheries Areas Network (FARNET) after the regulation had been in place.[5] Omission by Commission officials of the FLAG terminology from the drafting of the EMFAF regulation may well have been a technical oversight, but it nevertheless coincides with a wider trend towards a more broadened focus.

A bellwether of the possible implications of this change can be seen in Sweden, which dropped the FLAG terminology already during the EMFF period between 2014 and 2020. In this country, FLAGs cease to exist during the current programming period, where LAGs are no longer able to use EMFAF funding (although they may still finance some fisheries-related projects from EAFRD; see Linke & Siegrist, 2023). Affected by the transition to broader blue economy objectives (cf. Evans et al., 2023), of which this change seems a part of, small-scale fishers' representation and attention to their particular needs is becoming ever more marginal. These developments raise concerns over a dilution of the status of small-scale fisheries and their dependent communities, as well as declining attention to opportunities for integrated sectoral-territorial development.

Implementing CLLD in fisheries through FLAGs

Like LAGs in general, FLAGs face the creative test of interpreting and putting into practice the core features and principles of the neo-endogenous 'LEADER approach', which must be met for local development to be successful, whilst adapting and tailoring how they do this to the circumstances of their specific fisheries development context. These principles include:

- a *bottom-up approach*, where the local community initiates development activities in its area and takes key decisions for shaping a local strategy and selection of projects;
- an *area-based* focus, where the local community defines the area to develop, and public funding targets this area as a whole rather than individual sectors of the economy;
- *partnership*, where local actors from the public, private and third sectors work together in LAGs and jointly decide what is needed for their area;
- *multi-sectoral integration*, through which supported activities have to be interrelated and form a coherent whole, capitalising on linkages between sectors to achieve synergies and multiplier effects;
- *innovation*, whereby local actors are encouraged to seek new solutions to local challenges, via innovative methods of community involvement and animation;

- *decentralisation*, through which decision-making power is invested at the local level; and
- *networking and co-operation*, connecting areas that face similar challenges through exchanges, learning and joint projects.

Whilst the application of CLLD in fisheries is in many ways similar to the way LEADER has been implemented in rural areas, certain contrasts can be observed. For example, significant differences arise in the way area-based, bottom-up development is interpreted by FLAGs. Many FLAGs were set up to ensure a sufficient critical mass of the fishing sector, which meant that the FLAG areas can, in some countries or regions, be very large. In Finland, for example, a single FLAG can typically cover the area of several LEADER LAGs (see Salmi & Svels, 2023). This wider geography can impact the degree of involvement of local actors in the development of local strategies, board participation, sense of cohesion and identity and the way community animation has to be organised. Moreover, under the EMFAF programming period, some member states were considering, for efficiency reasons, to further increase the geographical scale of their FLAG areas, which may intensify difficulties in encouraging participation of active, small boat sector fishers.

In building partnerships of public, private and civil actors, the core imperative for the FLAGs rests on a tailored approach to animating and forging wholly new and inclusive constituencies and networks to address the long-standing disconnect and lack of familiarity between the local community and a fishing sector that itself is highly fragmented and often disengaged (Symes et al., 2015). This imperative is in many ways the central justification as to why an identifiable and bespoke fisheries-focused CLLD is needed. It explains why many FLAGs have appointed managers who have knowledge of and are well-connected within the sector—as described by Salmi and Svels (2023) for the Finnish situation.

As has been found within wider research on LEADER LAGs (Shucksmith, 2000), partnership-building in FLAGs must be wary of simply reinforcing established power structures and existing hierarchies, if they are to build capacity within the less well-organised and more isolated small-scale fisheries sector. In practice, the composition of the FLAG partnerships is very often strongly focused on the fishing sector. In some member states, rules for the selection of FLAGs specify that local groups have to involve a certain minimum percentage of fisheries representatives in order to be eligible for funding. Very often, the key drivers of FLAGs are fishing organisations, and in some cases, this can be weighted to the larger scale, more organised segments of the sector. This stands in contrast to member states where fisheries interests in FLAGs are more marginal as is the case in Sweden (Linke et al., 2022, p. 543). More widely within the implementation of CLLD, it is the case that the composition of LAGs can take on different emphases. Whereas FLAGs have involved private sector interests, in urban LAGs funded by the ERDF and/or ESF, it is local (public) authorities that tend to play a more important role, compared to EAFRD-funded rural LAGs, where there can be a greater prominence of civic sector organisations alongside local authorities.

Already under the EFF and EMFF, the small-scale fisheries sector and its specific territorial development opportunities were in some areas becoming marginal to the broader FLAG or LAG agendas and their representation. It is not uncommon for managers and administrators at the programme level to have limited appreciation of, or be ill-equipped to engage with, the sector and encourage its active participation (see Bugeja-Said et al., 2022). As mentioned above, there is growing concern that this pattern of marginalisation will become more pronounced under the EMFAF, with fishing interests not recognising a clear fisheries identity either within the LAG name or remit, and thus not perceiving CLLD as an initiative relevant to them.

Like their rural counterparts, FLAG local development strategies have followed an integrated multiple-sector approach. This feature has been a defining characteristic of the FLAG system,

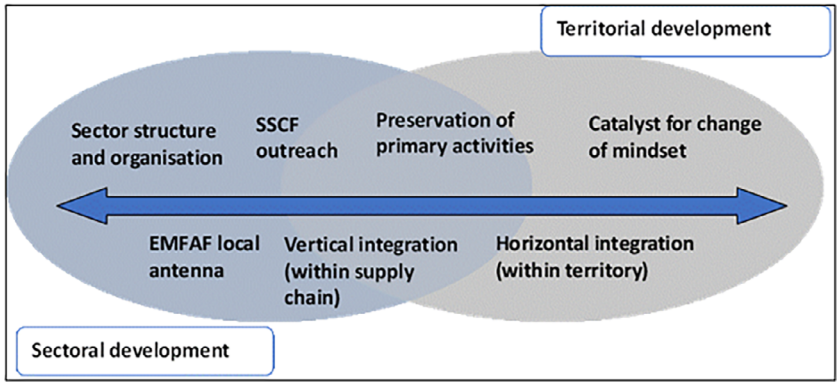

FIGURE 1 Reaching a balance between sectoral and territorial development.

allowing progress in adding value between the fisheries sector and other local economic drivers and potentials, thereby departing from the narrow sectoral approach of the CFP and associated fisheries structural funds (Linke & Siegrist, 2023; Phillipson & Symes, 2015). However, it is not unusual to find local strategies that are strongly focused on the fishing sector and not taking full advantage of this broader focus. In FLAGs combining fisheries with other EU Funds, the strategies more typically adopt a broader, multi-sectoral approach, even if the EMFF/EMFAF contribution is used to finance strictly fishing-related activities.

Impact on the ground comes primarily from the FLAGs' ability to reach out to small-scale beneficiaries and create synergies between fisheries and other sectors or supply chains (Freeman et al., 2023). Though published evaluative material on FLAGs is somewhat limited, these benefits are confirmed by studies and evaluation reports at the member state level. For example, in Estonia, an evaluation carried out in 2017 has shown that the main achievement of FLAGs was in strengthening the fishing sector and human capacity building (Reinma, 2017). In Poland, an in-depth analysis of LEADER/CLLD commissioned by the Polish Managing Authority in 2019 has shown that LAGs using both EMFF and EAFRD were more successful than purely rural LAGs in cross-sectoral integration (Abramowicz et al., 2019).[6] The Polish report notes as good practice that FLAGs are bringing together the fishing sector with tourism, gastronomy and processing actors, thereby highlighting the practical potential of the above-mentioned 'middle way' trajectory between sectoral and territorial development (Phillipson & Symes, 2015).

Figure 1 shows the spectrum of degrees of focus between the fishing sector and wider territorial development, which can be observed across FLAGs, with each FLAG representing a delicate negotiation of this balance in their activities. FLAGs situated towards the left of the spectrum typically build on or help the fishing sector to become better organised and visible in the community, offering targeted support to small-scale coastal fisheries and facilitating access to additional sources of funding—that is, acting as a 'local antenna' of the EMFF/EMFAF or strengthening linkages within the fisheries value chain. FLAGs towards the right side of the spectrum, focus on the broader diversification of the area's economy, facilitate the industry's integration with other sectors, or may look to improving the image of fisheries and changing the attitudes of key local actors towards the sector.

FLAGs can also differ from their rural counterparts in terms of their attitude to multi-funding. Generally, rural LEADER LAGs consider multi-funding primarily as an opportunity to bring more money to the area and to enhance their ability to respond to local needs. However, this is not always the case for FLAGs, especially those that from the very beginning strongly focused on the

fishing sector. They can consider multi-funding as a risk—whereby additional sources of funding and a wider range of stakeholders involved in implementation are seen as potentially diminishing the voice of fisheries and weakening the FLAG's credibility and relevance for the fishing sector (e.g., see Linke & Siegrist, 2023).

As for the innovation principle, anecdotal evidence suggests that many FLAGs have been more strongly focused on innovation-oriented projects than is typical for LEADER LAGs. This could partly be due to the fact that they tend to have smaller budgets than LEADER LAGs, and therefore must focus on those activities that are likely to have more impact. Moreover, given their shorter history, they do not have an extensive bank of past projects from which to replicate.

Finally, networking has been an important driver of the uptake of CLLD in fisheries areas. For example, where FLAGs have overlapped or been coterminous with LEADER areas, managing authorities and local actors have been able to benefit from the long-standing LEADER experience, in some cases going as far as sharing back office and/or administrative functions. The European Commission's Directorate General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries also actively encouraged capacity building and exchange of learning for managing authorities and actors on the ground, through the dedicated service FARNET (2009–2021) which, since 2022, has been integrated into the European Fisheries and Aquaculture Monitoring, Evaluation and Local Support Network.

Looking ahead

Throughout their existence, FLAGs have intended, as the name suggests, to put fisheries development at the forefront of their local work. In many cases, they have been successful in enhancing small-scale fisheries and local democracy in coastal and inland communities. Through mobilising novel constituencies of fishing and community participants, they have been a positive force for local development, leading to improved relationships between the fishing sector and wider local social and economic networks and helping the sector to reimagine its role and contribution to local economies and wellbeing of coastal communities. FLAGs have therefore been able to form a functional system that supports revitalising coastal and rural communities and their small-scale fishing livelihoods and, in many cases, lived up to their potential of nurturing the social dimension of fisheries policy.

Yet, it is also apparent that outcomes vary substantially when CLLD and the FLAG approach have been interpreted and applied in different national and local settings and filtered through respective institutional contexts. The F in (F)LAGs has, at least in some countries, increasingly become more of a bolt-on to existing territorial development. Small-scale fisheries are becoming eclipsed by other interests, whether it be the growing emphasis on aquaculture, recreation or conservation concerns (see Linke & Siegrist, 2023) or the trend towards a more generic application of CLLD, which is less sensitive and visible to their needs and circumstances. It is clear that significant, ongoing challenges remain around supporting the organisation, social renewal and status of small-scale, coastal fisheries, and enabling the benefits and added value from their improved integration within local supply chains and territorial development.

There are indications that the FLAG system itself, as an exceptional but still relatively fledgling governance instrument of the CFP, is becoming increasingly enveloped by wider priorities of coastal development and blue growth (European Commission, 2012), presenting threats of marginalisation of local, small-scale, capture fisheries (Allison et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2023; Jentoft et al., 2022; Österblom et al., 2020; Percy & O'Riordan, 2020). Fundamentally, the ever-changing and broadening priorities within the remit of the EU structural funding programmes

(from EFF to EMFF, to EMFAF) illustrate a systemic shifting and a dilution of focus away from fisheries. For Symes (2023, p. 97), these developments mirror a 'history of instability in the remit of structural policy and a tendency to clutch at new fashions', leading him to be 'apprehensive' over the future of the FLAG initiative.

It therefore becomes increasingly important to consider the implications of the growing imperative of maritime development and blue growth for the status and adaptation of coastal communities and small-scale fisheries. In their thematic review of risks and opportunities for coastal communities under a blue economy agenda, Evans et al. (2023) show how pursuing existing blue growth interests and a business-as-usual approach potentially results not only in harmful effects for small-scale fishers and their communities but also 'a lose-lose situation for all—developers, maritime sectors, financiers and dependent coastal communities' (Evans et al., 2023, p. 12). Instead, they argue, coastal communities need to be centre stage and 'empowered to develop in ways that secure their long-term needs' while being 'supported in their role as environmental stewards of coastal ecosystems' (Evans et al., 2023, p. 12).

It follows that combining sectoral and territorially focused strategies and associated funding streams is, as intended through the FLAG system, of growing relevance for co-producing synergistic opportunities for developing fisheries as an integrative part of coastal community development. Although still modest in scale, and it cannot be said that they have led to a wider transformation of fisheries governance, FLAGs may well provide a successful test case for identifying ways to widen participation, collaboration and local involvement more generally in the CFP and for upscaling wider industry collaboration and its integration within local and regional economies. For CLLD in general, they may give a timely reminder of the value of a more differentiated CLLD approach tailored to different sectoral-territorial contexts.

Introducing the articles

Responding to the need for further reflection on the contribution and learnings from the FLAG experience, the accompanying articles in this special collection of *Sociologia Ruralis* focus on the different institutional and procedural contexts of implementing the FLAG system. They probe how the FLAG's work relates to key issues of sustainable rural development, including different forms of governance, legitimacy, social capital, diversification and power relations. Each in their own way considers how the FLAG system works to the benefit of small-scale coastal and inland fisheries and their wider communities in different national settings as part of a combined territorial-sectoral approach. Despite occasions where it may not have been possible to bring support to local small-scale fisheries, they demonstrate the strength of the approach overall.

In their comparative analysis, Svels and Thuesen (2024) show how the Danish and Finnish FLAGs reflect different social organisational and democratic traditions. The Danish FLAGs demonstrate input legitimacy, albeit fishing sector interests are relatively weakly represented on FLAG boards. On the other hand, while the Finnish FLAGs demonstrate a lower level of input legitimacy, fisheries interests are substantially represented. These differences stem from sociocultural aspects and divergent national implementations of the FLAG system.

Salmi and Svels (2023) explore the central role of FLAG managers in the Finnish governance system, in which FLAGs are playing a key role in filling the gap in local support for small-scale fisheries. Managers' local expertise, commitment and networking have been crucial to success, with their work supported by the participation of fishers and other stakeholders in FLAG boards. Moreover, FLAG managers are positioned as critical intermediaries in horizontal and vertical

networks that enhance local fisheries livelihoods and connect those with local communities and institutions at various levels.

Linke and Siegrist (2023) analyse the Swedish FLAG system's ability to support small-scale fisheries and community development. Based on two successful local cases, the authors show that in principle it is possible for FLAGs to create momentum and materialise the place-based participatory method of endogenous development. However, at the same time, the 'success cases' reveal the fickle and contingent nature of these arrangements. The authors conclude that the existing implementation policies and organisational structures in Sweden overall have not been conducive for supporting small-scale fisheries and coastal communities' interests to enable the integrated development approach envisioned for FLAGs.

García-Lorenzo et al. (2024) analyse the role of FLAGs in small-scale fisheries in the region of Galicia in Spain. The FLAG system was introduced here in a coastal region with an existing highly organised fishing sector embedded in traditional organisations, the *cofradias*. The results show that there is a strong and positive relationship between FLAGs and *cofradias*. *Cofradias* have been key actors of the Galician fishing sector and have therefore been included in the FLAGs' decision-making bodies. The FLAGs' tools for territorial development and their funded activities have contributed to benefit small-scale fisheries and their communities. However, the needs of the most vulnerable fishing stakeholders are less often covered because funding has been concentrated in larger *cofradias*.

Freeman et al. (2023) focus on the role of FLAGs in building social capital and stimulating short food supply chains as a possible mechanism for increasing added value and (re-) localising the small-scale fisheries sector to aid territorial development. They apply a novel *fuzzy-set* qualitative comparative analysis approach using survey data from across Europe. The article is the first application of this method in the context of CLLD. They find that different combinations of social capital (structural, normative-cognitive and network governance) lead to a stronger presence of short food supply chains, depending on local territorial factors.

Finally, stepping back from the specific contributions of individual articles, it is pertinent to note the practical and symbolic position of FLAGs as a governance structure that sits at the interface between fisheries social science and rural studies. These areas of scholarship have much to gain from cross-fertilising their work and have common roots in research on coastal and rural livelihoods, but have only intermittently connected over time in the pages of this journal (Symes, 1996). The special issue at hand is the third collection dedicated to fisheries that has been published in *Sociologia Ruralis*, with the previous issues appearing in 1996 (Otterstad & Symes, 1996) and 2015 (Phillipson et al., 2015), which have presented touchstones for the current collection. The latter arises from several collaborations and working groups, notably from contributions at the European Society for Rural Sociology (ESRS) Congress 2019 in Trondheim, the 2021 MARE People and the Sea Conference (virtual), a 2022 ESRS Satellite meeting in Turku Finland and the OceanGov COST project.[7]

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dedicate the special issue to the memory of our close friend and colleague David Symes, whose sharp perspective gave the special issue its focus and direction.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The authors has provided the required Data Availability Statement, and if applicable, included functional and accurate links to said data therein.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Defined by the European Commission (2012) as encompassing aquaculture, renewable energy, coastal and maritime tourism, marine biotechnology and seabed mining.

[2] While rural studies researchers and readers of *Sociologia Ruralis* will be familiar with the origins and contribution of LEADER and CLLD, for a general readership of this special issue, the LEADER approach, building upon LAGs of public and private local actors responsible for a local development strategy and allocation of project funding to businesses and communities, is rooted in the (neo-)endogenous model of rural development. This model rests on the assumption that local communities themselves are best placed to inform their own development (Lowe et al., 1995, 1998; Miret-Pastor et al., 2020; Ray, 2000a, 2000b; van der Ploeg et al., 1994). LEADER (*Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale*) was introduced in the early 1990s as a community initiative. It expanded in scope and geographical coverage of rural areas through several phases, eventually becoming 'mainstreamed' as an approach and integral part of the EU's rural development policy and also extended as CLLD in rural, fisheries and urban areas (cf. Budzich-Tabor, 2014).

[3] The average size of project funded through the FLAGs, as of December 2018, was EUR 71,000, of which 57% came from public support and 43% from beneficiaries' own contribution. Fisheries LAGs tend to have lower budgets than LEADER LAGs (on average EUR 1.9 million, compared to EUR 2.7 million), although significant differences between member states can be observed. For example, LEADER LAGs in Greece and Ireland had budgets of around EUR 9 million on average, while the EMFF FLAG budgets were below the EU average. Conversely, FLAGs in Estonia and Spain had EMFF budgets over EUR 3 million—significantly higher than the EU average. In some countries, such as Germany and Sweden, EMFF funding represented only a modest top-up of LEADER funding (Linke & Siegrist, 2023).

[4] It is expected that the number of FLAGs will be roughly similar to the previous periods. However, in some countries, FLAGs will cease to exist, as in Sweden.

[5] Throughout this article, we use the term FLAG for all LAGs that use EFF, EMFF or EMFAF funding.

[6] This stands in contrast to an evaluation in Sweden stating that projects could potentially be funded through the EARDF alone, leading to the view that the practice of multi-funding was viewed as obsolete (see Linke & Siegrist, 2023).

[7] The Ocean Governance for Sustainability—challenges, options and the role of science (OceanGov CA15217) COST action network aimed to establish an integrative vision, and a series of approaches that informs research and future policy directions on crosscutting sustainability-driven issues related to the fragmented governance framework of oceans, seas and coastlines within regional waters and the open ocean in areas beyond national jurisdiction.

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