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## Economic Situations, Expansion-crisis, and the Effect Of Rural Development policies: The Case of Castilla-La Mancha, Spain

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## **Economic Situations, Expansion-crisis, and the Effect of Rural Development policies: The Case of Castilla-La Mancha, Spain**

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### **Abstract**

In 1991, over thirty years ago, the European Commission's [EC] LEADER initiative was set up to revitalize the rural environment using its endogenous potential. Although it is now fully consolidated as a public action and despite of the great interest it has aroused, not much research has considered the role played by the LEADER Programme in times of crisis. This article aims to study the performance of the LEADER Programme in crisis periods and compare it to a time of expansion in an eminently rural area, Castilla-La Mancha, Spain. For this purpose, we considered a general model and two sub-models, with a sample of 2,403 projects that generated employment during the 2007–2013 and 2014–2022 programming periods. The results show that LEADER was more effective in times of crisis than in times of expansion. During the latter, the public sector played an important role.

**Keywords:** LEADER, 2014–2022 programming period, 2007–2013 programming period, Local Action Groups, rural areas

## **Situations économiques, expansion-crise et effets des politiques de développement rural: Le cas de Castilla-La Mancha (Espagne)**

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### **Résumé**

C'est en 1991, il y a plus de trente ans, que l'initiative communautaire LEADER a été mise en place dans le but de revitaliser le milieu rural en utilisant son potentiel endogène. Bien qu'elle soit aujourd'hui pleinement consolidée en tant qu'action publique et malgré le grand intérêt qu'elle a suscité, peu de recherches se sont penchées sur le rôle joué par le programme LEADER en temps de crise. L'objectif de cet article est d'étudier les performances du programme LEADER en période de crise et de les comparer à une période d'expansion dans une région éminemment rurale, la Castille-La Manche (Espagne). Pour ce faire, nous considérons un modèle général et deux sous-modèles, avec un échantillon de 2 403 projets ayant généré des emplois au cours des périodes de programmation 2007-2013 et 2014-2022. Les résultats montrent que LEADER a été plus efficace en période de crise qu'en période d'expansion. Durant ces dernières, le secteur public a joué un rôle important.

**Mots-clés :** LEADER, période de programmation 2014-2022, période de programmation 2007-2013, groupes d'action locale, zones rurales

## 1.0 Introduction

Over recent decades, the rural environment has suffered from depopulation, ageing, masculinisation, loss of income and shortage of services and therefore needs to be revitalised and promoted. This need to close the economic and social gaps between urban and rural areas has led to the appearance of many initiatives within the European Union and its member states, one of the most outstanding being the LEADER methodology. Since this program was launched, it has tried to support rural areas by implementing rural development programs with their different measures and by creating bodies for territorial administration called Local Action Groups [LAGs]. LEADER is the acronym for *Liaisons Entre Activités de Développement de l'Économie Rurale* [Links Between Rural Economy Development Activities]. Since 1991, rural development has been part of European policy, bringing together the Common Agricultural Policy and the Cohesion Policy in the form of a community initiative (Olar & Jitea

, 2021; Dax & Oedl-Wieser, 2016; Kull, 2014). The first LEADER programming period took place between 1991 and 1994 and aimed to promote a model based on upward, inter-sectoral cooperation. During the second edition, from 1994 to 1999, LEADER II was adopted in almost half of rural areas. In the third phase, from 2000 to 2006, the main focus of LEADER+ was the long-term needs of the territory. After the 2007–2013 programming period, LEADER became a cross-cutting methodology and was included in the 4th axis of the Rural Development Programme financed by the new European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). The 2014–2020 programming period was named Community-led Local Development (Masot & Alonso, 2017; Hoffmann & Hoffmann, 2018; European Union, 2013). In the latest phase covering 2023–2027, LEADER aims to increase the autonomy of local action groups whose goals are to reduce depopulation, encourage private promotion in the economic revitalization of rural fabric and to include the gender and youth perspective (Red Española de Desarrollo Rural [REDR], 2023).

LEADER consolidates its role in: (a) production diversification, social articulation and the generation of social capital (Nieto et al., 2022; López Cotelo & López Galán, 2018; Cejudo et al., 2019); (b) the enhancement of rural identity by empowering the local population (Moscoso, 2005); and (c) the promotion of local development based on endogenous resources (Bosworth et al., 2016) and contributing to job creation by improving quality of life and preserving the environment (López Cotelo & López Galán, 2018). So, in theory, LEADER has a positive effect on regions, building social capital, creating and strengthening collective identities and increasing confidence among local inhabitants (Dargan & Shucksmith, 2008; Papadopoulou et al., 2011; Tirado & Hernández, 2019). But the results of the LEADER Programme vary, some being as expected (Galdós & Ruiz, 2016; Nieto & Cárdenas, 2016, 2017; Paúl et al., 2016), while others were not (Navarro et al., 2018; Cañete et al., 2017; Camarero, 2019; Alario & Morales, 2020; Camacho et al., 2020; Cejudo et al., 2021).

LEADER is based on the tenets of the theory of neoendogenous development and the empowerment of local society (Navarro et al., 2018), and deals with structural problems in rural areas and the challenges that stem from new environmental, residential and productive functions (Espancia et al., 2000; Perrier-Cornet, 2003; Serrano et al., 2021). This theory considers that it is the people that work locally who have the best knowledge of their internal problems, their territory and any endogenous assets and potential that are available (Shucksmith, 2010; Navarro et al., 2018; Bosworth et al., 2020; Martínez-Arroyo et al., 2022; Dax & Oedl-Wieser, 2016). In addition to involving local residents, entrepreneurs, self-employed workers and associations (Cárdenas &

Nieto, 2020), local and extra-local connections are required (Lowe et al., 2019). However, in order to promote strategies for neoendogenous development, social innovation is needed. This means that the local people and territories involved have to adopt new forms of collaborative action, developing organizational structures and institutional capacity (Nordberg et al., 2020; Neumeier, 2012; Moulaert et al., 2005). It is for this reason, as stated by García (2005) that sub-national governments at the regional or local level have to take action to resolve collective problems and find solutions to any challenges arising: the Europeanization of public policies, local development and the environment. It is, therefore, necessary to articulate collective interests with the closest administration. In this process, LAGs play an important role by identifying endogenous resources and promoting links and collaboration between local agents (Menconi et al., 2018; Opria et al., 2021].

LAGs are responsible for the management and proper administration of LEADER aid, although they are under the strict supervision of regional bodies. They must also design and set up the rural development strategy in their territory. They have been considered key for achieving sustainable rural development in Europe since the Johannesburg Summit of 2002 (Björstig & Sandström, 2017). Until 2007, LAGs had autonomy and flexibility for decentralized local administration (Serrano et al., 2021), but this changed with the inclusion of LEADER in axis 4 of Rural Development Programmes. From then on, the LAG principles of bottom-up participation became weaker, as did their structures (Navarro et al., 2018), and the influence of management authorities and regional governments increased. The latter are reluctant to empower local agents in the construction of the framework of action. However, this approach is perceived as being too rigid and bureaucratic and ends up exasperating local agents (Esparcia et al., 2015; Cuesta, 2023)

In parallel, economies have been subject to varying degrees of disruption. An economic recession holds back processes of change and development in rural areas and damages growth and rural employment (Berkowitz et al., 2015; Sánchez-Zamora, 2019). In Spain, the crisis of 2008 had particularly serious effects on the labour market, and large numbers of workers quickly lost their jobs (Giulia & Calvo, 2015; Sanromà 2012). Castilla-La Mancha was no exception and, in fact, saw the most marked effects in the whole country. As found by Blázquez and Mora (2016), levels of employment and household incomes dropped, pushing up unemployment and poverty.

In such a situation of economic crisis in which the labour market is one of the most affected areas, it is appropriate to consider this within the LEADER framework, particularly because the results may help design future territorial policies (Sánchez-Zamora, 2019). Authors such as Ray (1999a, 1999b), Shucksmith (2010) and Navarro et al. (2018) state that LEADER, through its projects and by promoting endogenous development, aims to make rural territories more resilient in such complicated situations. For the region of Andalusia, Flores (2016) found that during the 2008 economic crisis, the implementation of LEADER (programming period 2007–2013) had satisfactory results in both investment generated and employment. However, also for Andalusia, Cejudo et al. (2019) and for Extremadura, Cárdenas and Nieto (2017) found that, during a crisis, since the number of districts with no projects implemented by a public promoter increased, the effects on employment were moderate (Rodríguez et al., 2019). Outside Spain, Angioloni (2019) concluded that in Northern Ireland the best results for job creation were during the 2007–2013 programming period, and in the case of the Czech Republic, the 2014–2020 programming period only partially met local needs (Konečný et al., 2021).

It must not be forgotten that the reports of the European Court of Auditors (2022) mention the presence of ‘deadweights’ (investments would have gone ahead all the same without public support) and a degree of short-termism.

For all the above reasons, this study aims to compare the role of the LEADER Programme in times of crisis, that is, during the 2007–2013 programming period, as against periods of growth, that is the 2014–2022 period. It focuses on an eminently rural region in the south of Europe, that of Castilla-La Mancha, Spain. Using an index of achievement based on the employment generated in each programming period, we drew up a general model and two sub-models to identify both the general performance of LEADER and, specifically, its performance during times of crisis. The article is structured as follows: an analytical framework followed by materials and methods, then results, discussion and conclusions.

## 2.0 Analytical Framework

### 2.1 Literature Review and Hypotheses

In the various LEADER programmes, the aim has been to make up for the limitations of rural areas by improving their situation and diversifying their economies, making rural enterprises more feasible, improving the representativity of rural society (Sacristán et al., 2016), creating new economic opportunities (Labianca, 2017) and even enhancing the capillarity of innovation (García-Cortijo et al., 2019). They have also gradually introduced social and territorial factors such as age, gender or territorial centrality (Sabaté, 2009). All this should also help fight depopulation and improve rural resilience (Martínez-Arroyo et al., 2015; Esparcia & Mesa, 2019; Miranda et al., 2019; Moyano, 2020).

Job creation is one of the multiplying effects of LEADER programmes (Angioloni et al., 2019) aiming to strengthen labour markets and self-employment, especially for groups affected by the dynamic of rural migration, young people and women (Herrera, 2019; Esparcia & Mesa, 2020; REDER, 2020). Researchers such as Fanjul et al. (2021) find that LEADER helped young people and women but had little effect on employment for men over 25. Along the same line, Camacho et al. (2020) suggest that LEADER generates employment but not enough. It must be remembered that the impact of measures to create jobs is determined by various elements: Krístková and Ratering (2012), Tocco et al. (2013) and Miranda et al. (2019) point to the type of productive activity; Martínez-Arroyo et al. (2022) to the involvement of private activity in more dynamic and more populated areas; Fanjul et al. (2021) to the amounts granted, and Esparcia and Mesa (2020) to new actors such as women and young people. The territory is another variable noted in the literature as influencing the effects of the LEADER projects (Cárdenas & Nieto, 2015; Miranda et al., 2019; Cañete et al., 2020; Cejudo et al., 2021). Other aspects to be considered are events taking place during the programming period, such as the 2008 crisis (Camacho et al., 2020; Esparcia & Mesa, 2020).

The main hypothesis (MH) analyzed in this paper is that the variation in the level of achievement of a LEADER Programme depends on

- MH1: environment variables (rurality),
- MH2: project characteristics, and
- MH3: special events taking place during the period (crises).

## 2.2 Area Studied

This article focuses on Castilla-La Mancha, a rural region located in the centre of Spain. Castilla-La Mancha represents 16% of the surface area of Spain and contains 11% of its municipalities and 4% of its population. These data indicate that rurality, from the point of view of population, is key in the region, where 58% of the municipalities have fewer than 500 inhabitants and 70% have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants. Castilla-La Mancha is the autonomous community with the second lowest population density (25.8 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>), very far from the average for Spain, where 93.9 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>. 67% of its municipalities have a population density below 12.5 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup> (49% for Spain as a whole). It is thus classified by the EC as an area with very low population density (EC, 2013; European Parliament and the Council, 2003).

In terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, Castilla-La Mancha is in position number 14 among the 17 autonomous communities and number 9 in absolute terms. For agriculture, livestock production and forestry, the region has a Gross Added Value of 3.719 billion euros; their relative weight in GDP is 9.4%, as opposed to 3.1% for Spain as a whole, the highest for all Autonomous Communities (Instituto Nacional de Estadística [INE], 2021). This is a relevant factor for ascertaining the weight of the agricultural sector in the region's economy but also in the rural environment, which is characterized by its ties to this sector. Also relevant is the specific weight of the agrifood sector, which includes both agricultural produce and the food industry. In this case, the figure for Castilla-La Mancha is 18% of its GDP, as opposed to 8.9% for Spain as a whole (Maudos et al., 2021). Figure 1 shows the location of Castilla-La Mancha.

Figure 1: Study área Castilla -La Mancha.



Source: Adapted by the authors from [https://educativo.ign.es/atlas-didactico/relaciones-internacionales-bach/la\\_unin\\_europea\\_ue.html](https://educativo.ign.es/atlas-didactico/relaciones-internacionales-bach/la_unin_europea_ue.html)

### 2.3 LEADER 200–2013 and 2014–2022 Programming Periods

For the LEADER 2007-2013 programming period, Castilla-La Mancha registered 4,223 applications, to which a sum of 251.4 M€ (17% of the national amount) was allocated. 1,507 (35.6%) of these projects created 3,887.69 full-time equivalent contracts, of which 47.3% were for women (1,838.91 contracts), 10.98% for young people (426,82 contracts) and 41.72% for men and over 25 (1,691.96 contracts). The amount established for generating a contract was 14,425.51 € (see Table 1, column 2).

In the 2014–2022 programming period, 4,465 projects were registered, with a total amount of 188.2 M€ (23% of the national amount). Out of all these applications, 896 projects (20%) created jobs, specifically 4,777.73 full-time equivalent contracts, of which 38.12% were for women (1,821.20 contracts), 34.51% for young people (1,648.65 contracts) and 27.37% for the rest of the population (1,307.88 contracts). The amount established for a contract was 5,113.72 € (see Table 1, column 3).

Table 1. *Total employment created during the LEADER 2007-2013 and LEADER 2014-2022 programming periods. Comparison. Castilla-La Mancha (CLM)*

|  | <b>LEADER 2007–<br/>2013 programming<br/>period</b> | <b>LEADER 2014–<br/>2022 programming<br/>period</b> | <b>Rate of<br/>change<br/>(%)</b> |
|--|---|---|-----------------------------------|
| No. of applications  | 4,223   | 4,465   | 5.7                               |
| No. of applications<br>(employment) <sup>(1)</sup>         | 1,507   | 896   | -40.54                            |
| Total amount (M€)  | 251.41  | 188.2   | -25.16                            |
| Amount for employment<br>CLM (M€)                          | 56.07   | 24.43   | -56.43                            |
| Total new/consolidated<br>employment <sup>(2)</sup>        | 3,887.69  | 4,777.73  | 22.89                             |
| Women  | 1,838.91  | 1,821.20  | -0.96                             |
| Youth  | 426,82  | 1,648.65  | 286.26                            |
| Others <sup>(3)</sup>                                      | 1,621.96  | 1,307.88  | -19.36                            |
| Amount for employment/<br>Total employment<br>(€/contract) | 14,425.51   | 5,113.72  | -64.54                            |

<sup>(1)</sup> Total employment refers to all full-time, new and consolidated contracts. New employment refers to contracts that were created for the first time. Consolidated employment refers to improved working conditions for existing employment, providing one of the following conditions was met: (a) A temporary contract was converted into an open-ended one; (b) contract duration increased, and (c) contracts were maintained.

<sup>(2)</sup> Number of full-time equivalent contracts.

<sup>(3)</sup> Men and over 25 year-olds.

Source: Consejería de Agricultura, Agua y Desarrollo Rural (Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha).



Column 4 in Table 1 shows the rate of change between the programming periods, so the following comparisons can be made. In the 2014–2022 programming period, applications for projects increased by 5.7% over those for the 2007–2013 period. While job creation projects decreased by 40.54%, budget availability for the 2014–2022 period dropped by 56.43% with regard to the 2007–2013 period, without affecting employment figures, which increased by almost 23%. In addition, employment was diversified to include more women, and jobs were generated for young people. So, during the 2014–2022 period, the LAGs in Castilla-La Mancha were required, or at least expected, to do more with less (Esparcia & Mesa, 2020). These data lead us to think that the 2007–2013 and 2014–2022 periods did not follow the same dynamic. In the next section, we explore the reasons.

### 3.0 Data and Methods

#### 3.1. Sample and Variables

The database is made up of a sample of the 2,403 LEADER projects that generated employment in the region of Castilla-La Mancha during the 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 LEADER programming periods, with 1,507 and 896 contracts, respectively. The source of the data is the Council for Agriculture, Water and Rural Development of the Government of Castilla-La Mancha [*Consejería de Agricultura, Agua y Desarrollo Rural, Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha*]. Employment is used as an indicator of achievement because, as stated by Camacho et al. (2020), Martínez-Arroyo et al. (2022), Miranda et al. (2019) and Moyano (2020), it indicates the extent to which LEADER programs were successful (Olar & Jitea, 2021; Domanski & Gwosdz, 2010). According to data from the EC (2021), Poland, Spain and Romania, followed by Finland, Portugal and Austria, are the countries where most direct employment was generated during the 2014–2022 programming period. Moreover, the creation of jobs specifically for women and young people is an aspect that the European Union takes very much into account when determining the amount of funds to be granted (Pinedo, 2019). Also, for 96% of LAGs in Spain, employment is of prime importance in rural areas (Esparcia & Mesa, 2020).

The variables used in the model are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Variables in the Empirical Model*

| Variables                                  | Type       | Description  |
|--|------------|--|
| Achievement index for LEADER projects (AI) | Continuous | Number of full-time contracts (both new and consolidated) generated by the projects. Source: Authors, based on data from the <i>Consejería de Agricultura, Agua y Desarrollo Rural de la Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha</i> .  |
| Rural area (RA)                            | Discrete   | Classification of Rural Areas as established by Decree 108/2021, dated 19 October (Diario Oficial de Castilla-La Mancha, 2021). Takes value 5 for sparsely populated areas, 4 for areas at risk of depopulation, 3 for intermediate rural areas, 2 for peri-urban rural areas, and 1 for urban areas. Source: Authors, based on Decree 108/2021, dated 19 October. |

**Table 2 continued**

|                         |            |  |
|-------------------------|------------|--|
| Inclusion of youth (IY) | Discrete   | Promotion of youth employment (training courses, consideration of young people as important individuals in project implementation).<br>Takes value 1 if generated, and 0 otherwise. Source: Authors, based on data from the <i>Consejería de Agricultura, Agua y Desarrollo Rural de la Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha</i> . |
| Inclusion of women (IW) | Discrete   | Promotion of employment for women (training courses, consideration of women as important individuals in project implementation).<br>Takes value 1 if generated, and 0 otherwise. Source: Authors, based on data from the <i>Consejería de Agricultura, Agua y Desarrollo Rural de la Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha</i> .    |
| Type of promoter (TP)   | Discrete   | Takes value 1 if the enterprise is public, an association or LAG and 0 otherwise.<br>Source: Authors, based on data from the <i>Consejería de Agricultura, Agua y Desarrollo Rural de la Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha</i> .  |
| Amount granted (AG)     | Continuous | Quartile of the amount granted in the project.<br>Takes value 4 in the fourth quartile, 3 in the third quartile, 2 in the second quartile and 1 in the first quartile. Source: Authors based on data from the <i>Consejería de Agricultura, Agua y Desarrollo Rural de la Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha</i> .               |
| PRO1                    | Discrete   | Fictitious variable that takes value 1 if the project belongs to the 2007–2013 programming period, and 0 otherwise.  |
| PRO2                    | Discrete   | Fictitious variable that takes value 1 if the project belongs to the 2014–2022 programming period, and 0 otherwise.  |

The descriptive statistics are shown in Table 3.

To complete this information, a test was performed to find any differences in the means for both periods. The Shapiro-Wilk W test for normal values, with  $w=0.58239$  and  $p\text{-value}=0.000$ , determines the non-normality of the endogenous variable (*AI*), so the Mann-Whitney U test was performed, finding  $z = -12.677$  and an associated probability of  $p\text{-value}=0.0000$ . This implies that there are differences in job creation between the two programming periods. Therefore, in the model proposed, two fictitious variables were included, one for each programming period: *PRO1* (LEADER 2007–2013) and *PRO2* (LEADER 2014–2022), and two sub-models were estimated: one with the observations from the 2007–2013 period, and the other with those from the 2014–2022 period.

The STATA 15 software was used to obtain the economic results.

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics of the Variables*

| <b>Continuous variables</b> |                |                |             |                  |         |         |
|-----------------------------|----------------|----------------|-------------|------------------|---------|---------|
|                             | <b>Minimum</b> | <b>Maximum</b> | <b>Mean</b> | <b>Std. dev.</b> |         |         |
| Achievement index (AI)      | 0.01           | 53.43          | 3.61        | 5.41             |         |         |
| <b>Discrete variables</b>   |                |                |             |                  |         |         |
|                             | Value 0        | Value 1        | Value 2     | Value 3          | Value 4 | Value 5 |
| Rural Area (RA)             |                | 1              | 146         | 698              | 109     | 1,449   |
| Inclusion of youth (IY)     | 2,212          | 191            |             |                  |         |         |
| Inclusion of women (IW)     | 2,226          | 177            |             |                  |         |         |
| Type of promoter (TP)       | 2,263          | 140            |             |                  |         |         |
| Amount granted (AG)         |                | 601            | 601         | 600              | 601     |         |
| LEADER 2007–2013 (PRO1)     | 896            | 1,507          |             |                  |         |         |
| LEADER 2014–2022 (PRO2)     | 1,507          | 896            |             |                  |         |         |

### 3.2 *Functional Form Model*

For the study we used the lhsonly (*left-hand-side*) Box–Cox model. This was because it suited the available data and guaranteed valid statistical inference with an endogenous variable (*AI*) that does not follow normal distribution, as explained in the previous section.

The difference in means for *AI* in the two programming periods required the introduction of two marker or dummy variables (*PRO1* and *PRO2*), without including the independent term,  $X_0$ , in order to avoid any multicollinearity from these variables ( $PRO1_i + PRO2_i = X_0$ ).

Since the aim was to identify the  $X_{ki}$  elements that have the greatest influence on the achievement index (*AI*) of a LEADER program, we posed the following model:

$$IL_i^{(\theta)} = \sum_{k=1}^7 \beta_k X_{ki} + u_i \quad (1)$$

When  $X_{kit}$  is replaced by the set of exogenous variables, we obtain:

$$IL_i^{(\theta)} = \beta_1 RA_i + \beta_2 IJ_i + \beta_3 IM_i + \beta_4 TP_i + \beta_5 IC_i + \beta_6 PRO1_i + \beta_7 PRO2_i + u_i$$

with  $i=1, 2, \dots, 2,403$ ,  $\theta$ = value of the power of the lhsonly model.

Moreover, to explain the differences in AI between the two programming periods of 2007–2013 and 2014–2022, we considered two sub-models of the model (1). We eliminated the PRO1 and PRO2 variables and included the independent term,  $X_{0i}$ . The equation to be estimated was:

$$IL_i^{(\theta)} = \beta_0 X_i + \beta_1 RA_i + \beta_2 IJ_i + \beta_3 IM_i + \beta_4 TP_i + \beta_5 IC_i + u_i \quad (2)$$

with  $i= 1, 2, \dots, 1,507$ , sub-model 1;  $i= 508, 509, \dots, 2,403$  submodel 2.

$\theta$ = value of the power of the lhsonly model.

The dependent variable is an *Achievement Index (AI)* measured in terms of employment, both new and consolidated, generated by the LEADER projects. New employment refers to jobs created for the first time, while consolidated employment refers to improved working conditions for existing jobs, providing that one of the following conditions is met: (a) a temporary contract is converted into an open-ended one; (b) contract duration is increased; or (c) contracts are maintained. The figure for employment is determined after certification by the project applicant and is counted as the number of full-time equivalent contracts for one year or the proportional fraction in the case of contracts for a working day of less than 8 hours or a working period of less than one year.

The independent variables based on the theoretical framework defined are:

- The type of Rural Area (RA),
- inclusion of youth (IY),
- inclusion of women (IW),
- type of promoter (TP),
- amount granted (AG),
- LEADER 2007–2013 projects (PRO1), and
- LEADER 2014–2022 projects (PRO2).

Where  $u_i$  is the random disturbance, which follows zero mean normal distribution with constant variance.

#### 4.0 Results and Discussion

First, the value of  $\theta$  was identified using the lhsonly (*left-hand-side only*) Box–Cox model, selecting the power of  $\theta$  with a p-value above 0.05 for the likelihood ratio (LR) test associated with  $\theta$  with values (-1, 0, 1) (see Table 4), and below 0.05 for the specific  $\theta$  values (see Table 5).

Table 4. *LR Statistic for Powers with Theta Values (-1, 0, 1)*

|  | <b>LR statistic<br/>Test h0</b> | <b>Restricted<br/>log likelihood</b> | <b>LR statistic<br/>chi2</b> | <b>P-value<br/>Prob &gt; chi2</b> |
|--|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>General model</b>                       | theta = -1                      | -8930.7713                           | 8549.84                      | 0.000                             |
| (lhsonly) left-hand-<br>side Box–Cox model | theta = 0                       | -4715.014                            | 118.32                       | 0.000                             |
|  | theta = 1                       | -7257.591                            | 5203.48                      | 0.000                             |
| <b>Sub-model 1</b>                         | theta = -1                      | -5345.6093                           | 5736.62                      | 0.000                             |
| (lhsonly) left-hand-<br>side Box–Cox model | theta = 0                       | -2490.1285                           | 25.66                        | 0.000                             |
|  | theta = 1                       | -4020.8002                           | 3087.00                      | 0.000                             |
| <b>Sub-model 2</b>                         | theta = -1                      | -2292.986                            | 358.50                       | 0.000                             |
| (lhsonly) left-hand-<br>side Box–Cox model | theta = 0                       | -2154.2972                           | 81.12                        | 0.000                             |
|  | theta = 1                       | -2952.3869                           | 1677.30                      | 0.000                             |

Table 5. *Theta Powers Estimated Using the Box-Cox Procedure*

|   | <b>Power</b> | <b>Coef.</b> | <b>Std. Err.</b> | <b>z</b> | <b>P&gt;z</b> |
|---|--------------|--------------|------------------|----------|---------------|
| <b>General model</b>                      |              |              |                  |          |               |
| (lhsonly) left-hand-side<br>Box–Cox model | theta        | -0.1490766   | .0128839         | -11.57   | 0.000         |
| <b>Sub-model 1</b>                        |              |              |                  |          |               |
| (lhsonly) left-hand-side<br>Box–Cox model | theta        | -0.0850891   | .0162086         | -5.25    | 0.000         |
| <b>Sub-model 2</b>                        |              |              |                  |          |               |
| (lhsonly) left-hand-side<br>Box–Cox model | theta        | -0.3028861   | .0347363         | -8.72    | 0.000         |

The results of the estimation are given in Table 6.

Table 6. *Results of Estimation*

|                              | <b>General Model</b>                          | <b>Sub-model 1</b>                       | <b>Sub-model 2</b>                           |
|------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Rural Area (RA)              | 0.0093394***<br>(0.0020272)                   | 0.0030141**<br>(0.0014196)               | 0.027641***<br>(0.0060822)                   |
| Inclusion of youth (IY)      | 0.037139***<br>(0.005038)                     | 0.0241741***<br>(0.0039514)              | 0.0498532***<br>(0.013127)                   |
| Inclusion of women (IW)      | 0.0583817***<br>(0.0044162)                   | 0.0273813***<br>(0.0030618)              | 0.1414858***<br>(0.0134665)                  |
| Type of promoter (TP)        | -0.0046643<br>(0.0091389)                     | 0.010757***<br>(0.0072769)               | -0.0457255**<br>(0.0233052)                  |
| Amount granted (AG)          | 0.023523***<br>(0.0019209)                    | 0.0144143***<br>(0.0013637)              | 0.0446962***<br>(0.0056435)                  |
| 2007-2013 programming period | 0.9865101***<br>(0.0103053)                   | -  | -  |
| 2014-2022 programming period | 0.9403192***<br>(.0107037)                    | -  | -  |
| Constant                     | -   | 0.9984303***<br>(0.0071129)              | 0.8769412***<br>(0.0310601)                  |
| F-Snedecor                   | F(7, 2396) =<br>25968.68<br>Prob > F = 0.0000 | F(5, 1501) =<br>54.47<br>Prob > F=0.0000 | F(5, 890) =<br>49.24<br>Prob > F =<br>0.0000 |
| Root MSE                     | 0.10375                                       | 0.05776                                  | 0.18745                                      |

In brackets: Estimated Std. Err. of the coefficients.

\* Denotes significance at the 10-percent level.

\*\* Denotes significance at the 5-percent level.

\*\*\* Denotes significance at the 1-percent level

The models estimated have a good quality of fit with a p-value associated with F-Snedecor below 0.05 and Root MSE close to zero. The exogenous variables in the models general are significant, with  $P \leq 0.05$ , except for the type of promoter (TP). In the sub-models, all the variables are significant.

The general model shows the importance of LEADER in areas with a greater degree of ruralisation (RZ). This aspect is directly related to the LEADER approach, which was introduced in response to the limitations of traditional policies (European Court of Auditors [ECA], 2022; Opria et al., 2021). Along the same lines are the results obtained by Iakovidou et al. (2002) for Greece. Cañete et al. (2018), however, found that in the region of Andalusia, Spain, LEADER focuses on the most dynamic and least rural areas. Also, it can be deduced from a comparison of the RZ parameters in the two sub-periods that LEADER provided important support in rural areas during the crisis period. For this reason, future LEADER programs should continue to be focused on small territories and on reducing imbalance (Camacho et al., 2020).

Another significant aspect that measures the success of the LEADER projects is the consideration of social inclusion of youth (IY) and women (IW). The LAGs have a strong tradition of focusing on this aspect (EC, 2021). Although this was significant and positive in both programming periods, it was particularly so in the 2014–2022 period. In the crisis period, it was also positive and significant but less so than during the period of growth. Miteva and Petrov (2019) point to the improvement for women and young people during the 2014–2022 programming period. Similar results were obtained in other Spanish regions: in Aragon, during LEADER 2014–2022, 110 initiatives were adopted to improve the competitiveness of SMEs and to help women start up new businesses (Palomar, 2019); in Murcia, the cases of 11 women entrepreneurs who were beneficiaries of LEADER policies were studied over at least fifteen years, pointing to the results of entrepreneurship by women for both revitalization of the territory and the professional development of rural women (Martínez et al., 2021); in Andalusia, the LAGs focused on employment for young people and, especially, for women in an attempt to reduce depopulation (Navarro-Valverde et al., 2021). On an international level, Kleinert (2018) stressed the role of the 2014–2022 LEADER program in meeting the needs of disadvantaged rural groups. The LAGs in Ireland stood out for their efforts to include women and young people in the labour market (EC, 2021). Other authors, such as Ludvig et al. (2017), found that the goal of LEADER was to support the inclusion of society as a whole.

Regarding the type of promoter (TP), in the general model, the results show that public agents do not determine the success of a LEADER program. One reason for this is that the public sector, especially more distant administrations, focuses on urban areas and neglects rural territories (Camacho et al., 2020). Another explanation is the lower awareness among certain public administrations of the need to revitalize the territory; as a result, they leave this responsibility to businesses or individuals (Dąbrowski, 2012). However, in the 2007–2013 LEADER program, the public sector played a significant role at the time of the economic crisis. As stated by Bjärstig and Sandström (2017), in rural areas, public entities support a weak private sector, especially in complex situations where it is also difficult to gain access to credit to carry out the investments needed for the projects being financed. Similarly, Ehrlich and Overman (2020) suggest that, in times of crisis, public sector intervention in the form of investments, subsidies and training is effective for growth and for reducing territorial disparities because, in general, at such times, unemployment mostly affects the private sector; the public sector either does not experience a net change in employment or may even create employment, acting as a buffer against the reduction in private sector employment (Montesinos et al., 2014).

Regarding the amount granted (AG), the larger the amount, the better the results of projects. These results are in line with those obtained by Cárdenas and Nieto (2017). In general, it has been found that the influence of the measure increases with the amount of support provided, leading to capital, investment, and productivity effects (Alexiadis et al., 2013). Angioloni (2019) finds that, for Northern Ireland during the 2007–2013 programming period, the employment results improved as funding increased. In Castilla-La Mancha, during the LEADER 2014–2022 period, despite the reduction in the budget available for Castilla-La Mancha, the AG still had a positive and significant effect on job creation, even greater than that for the LEADER 2007–2013 program. Esparcia and Mesa (2020) found that for the 2014–2022 period, the LAGs were able to do more with less. In fact, in the region of Andalusia, Spain, the large amounts of money spent during the 2007–2013 programming period did not guarantee success.

Finally, the general model shows that the LEADER 2007–2013 (PRO1) period was more effective than the 2014–2022 (PRO2) period. This leads us to conclude that this program is important during periods of economic crisis. In a comparison of PRO1 and PRO2, Esparcia and Mesa (2020) found that the LAGs assessed PRO2 more negatively. From the sub-models, we find that during the crisis period, the effectiveness of the LEADER program was due to the role played by the public sector, and the change to the LEADER 2014–2022 program showed that continuing to work on social inclusion led to an increase in the 2014–2022 program and greater orientation towards more rural zones.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

This article aims to analyze the positioning of the LEADER methodology based on the tenets of endogenous development, employment of local society and social innovation during complex macroeconomic times such as economic recessions or periods of growth. It studies Castilla-La Mancha, an eminently rural region in southern Europe. The models show that the two programming periods (2007–2013 and 2014–2022) provided significant support for rural areas where qualitative employment for young people and women played an important role. Public entities, together with associations and LAGs, were key during the 2007–2013 period coinciding with an economic recession.

Two main conclusions can, therefore, be reached from the research. The first is that LEADER was a significant tool during a crisis when an important role was played by the public entities that promoted projects; it is, therefore, important to stress the positive role played by the governance and social capital generated by the program. Conversely, private initiatives are less relevant, so a fundamental recommendation can be inferred for rural development policymakers in Europe namely, that public action in rural areas should aim to achieve more involvement through private initiatives. It can be inferred from the results obtained that LEADER should achieve greater synergies between public and private agents in order to draw up a joint diagnosis for the territory as a whole. Public action at any level (national, regional and/or local) is seen to be an important factor at difficult times. It can be said to have an anti-cyclical effect, but at times of greater growth, it is not the only agent involved. Public governance is a mechanism that exerts a great influence on social processes as a result of the new system of networks made up of multiple agents.

The second conclusion of this study is that the LEADER programming gives special relevance to the inclusion of women in the rural labour environment, which is key for sustainable, balanced development of the territory. During the 2014–2022 period, the gender approach and equal opportunities were at the



forefront, and affirmative action was encouraged. So much so that the current programming period of 2023–2027, at the request of Spain, includes the gender approach in the Strategic Plans of the CAP in order to deal with the difficulties still faced by women in outlying and isolated rural territories.

So, in each of its stages, the LEADER initiative aims to adapt in order to enable rural areas and rural populations to take advantage of resources and opportunities available in their territory and to convert them into projects based on a methodology involving participation and expansion of knowledge. It should also be stated that resources and mechanisms for implementing projects are limited when situations arise that affect territorial evolution at a macro level.

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