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Possible Actors in Local Foodscapes? LEADER Action Groups as Short Supply Chain Agents—A European Perspective

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Abstract: In recent decades, alongside industrialized agriculture and food-supply systems, an alternative, network-based framework has evolved supporting local development, social innovation and sustainability objectives. Short supply chains are in the focus of the new era. At the same time, from the 1990s a new, bottom-up, spatially bound rural development method, the Liaison Entre Actions pour le Développement de l'Economie Rurale (LEADER) approach, has arisen. The purpose of this study is to examine the involvement of LEADER local action groups in the management of alternative food systems in Europe. After a literature-based, detailed theoretical review, a quantitative analysis concerning the content of the official websites of action groups was conducted. A local product promoting quantitative index was created from the qualitative characteristics of the sites. From the collected data, using basic statistical analysis and thematic mapping connections were searched between local action group general characteristics and their short supply chain support activities. The results indicate notable national differences between Western and Eastern European and Mediterranean LEADER groups, supporting previous literature. It may be concluded that local action groups as potential hubs of social innovation, can be crucial actors in local foodscapes, mainly in less developed areas where other non-profit or for-profit organizations are unable to manage supply chains.

Keywords: short food chains; LEADER approach; alternative food networks



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1. Introduction

After decades of flourishing industrialized and globalized production chains, a new trend of steady appreciation of local actors has evolved. Beyond the prevalence of trust in organic products, consumers have started to rely on local ones as well [1,2]. Extensive literature supports the environmental and sustainability relevance of local and short product chains [3–5]. Short supply chains (SSCs) may directly (e.g., with the use of extensive methods and short transportation) or indirectly (e.g., through the development of local communities and other sustainability issues) support greenhouse gas mitigation [6]. Experiences of sustainable rural development are diverse in the literature either concerning tourism [7], the relevance of governance and partnership [8–10], social learning [11] or short food-supply chains [12].

Although a relatively broad spectrum of products (craft and artisanal or even energy) can be involved in local production, food seems to have the main relevance. Its importance goes far beyond the realm of the economy as many social, environmental and cultural issues are affected as well [13]. Their success often depends on the shortening of value-added chains, namely to what extent producers can reach consumers directly or through alternative civil food networks (AFN) [14,15]. Consequently, the role of e-commerce (e.g., the use of webshops) is crucial from this point of view [16]. The broad definition of e-commerce is formulated as the use of telecommunication instruments and methods to help the supplier and demand sides to obtain information, building connections and

supporting transactions [17]. Unfortunately, rural areas usually lack human capacities and the institutional backgrounds needed to support such innovations. Recent studies argue that only a minority of producers use these innovative forms to foster their selling activities. Accordingly, direct sales are a social innovation depending on local knowledge [18]. Alternative food chains supported by civic networks may trigger local and sustainable production, additionally helping ecology and sustainability to prevail [19].

The Liaison Entre Actions pour le Development de l'Economie Rurale (LEADER) programme was created decades ago as an EU community initiative to help the revitalization of backwards rural areas. From 2007 onwards, it was integrated into the official rural development policy of the European Community providing an opportunity for every rural area to implement bottom-up integrated development strategies. Although LEADER local action groups (LAGs) are a widespread phenomenon in rural parts of Europe, their role is sometimes underestimated and despised. As the programme is halfway between centrally managed financial subsidies and de-centralised local community development methods, their assessment is ambiguous. Some scholars state the method can advance socio-economic development projects through relatively low external financial support compared to other aid schemes [20]. Beyond the distribution of EU subsidies, LAGs may have different functions to support the socio-economic improvement of their region. Firstly, LEADER is considered to be a market-based rural development method [21,22]; secondly, in the functioning of LAGs the presence of democracy and multi-level governance is the key issue [23,24]; and finally, they are interpreted as soft spatial units adaptable to changing external circumstances [25]. LAGs can be declared discursive endogenous living labs [26,27] capable of planning and implementing innovative and sustainable development projects relating to their area. The promotion of local products is an essential part of the activity of LEADER LAGs [28]. Accordingly, LAGs are presupposed to be adequate forums for the promotion of local—mainly food—products. As living labs, they might support the invention and realization of localized solutions of sustainability [29].

Sustainability has long been part of agriculture and rural development at an EU policy level. On the one hand from 2007 the Axis 2 (improvement of the environment and the countryside) of the EU Common Agriculture Policy focuses on environmental issues, but on the other hand Axis 3 (the quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy) can also contribute to sustainability as well [30]. Axis 4, the LEADER approach integrates every other axis through a bottom-up, participatory and innovative/smart way [31,32].

Putting the LEADER action groups into the centre of research contributes to the spatial interpretation of sustainable development too. Beyond the global level regional sustainability issues—integrating the environmental, economic and social dimensions at a middle level—are of primary relevance as this spatial level has the critical mass for co-operative and innovative solutions, additionally they can mobilize the interest of people [33,34].

The relevance of this community initiative in the evolution of sustainable rural development is highlighted by many scholars [35,36]. The role of the LEADER program in such practices is described in a plenty of cases, but these mainly focus only on case studies relating to action groups of only one country [37–41]. Broader, international comparative studies on LEADER LAGs are relatively rare.

The activities of the LEADER action groups are various, including planning, community-building, economic and environmental development through the redistribution of EU financial aid and the mobilization of endogenous resources in an innovative mode. The LEADER action groups are the compounds of NGOs, entrepreneurs, local authorities and even natural persons, consequently their contribution to sustainable social innovations can be diverse. For-profit organizations may use information on innovative methods and add their own experiences related to production and distribution. Beyond for-profit purposes these innovations may be used for knowledge-sharing and awareness-rising activities

among social partners. It can be interpreted as a type of corporate social responsibility activity [42].

Through public members additional policy support (e.g., administrative procedures, green and local public procurement) and finances are available for sustainability awareness campaigns. These actors can provide public spaces (in concrete and virtual reality) and facilities for the promotion of more sustainable socio-economic solutions [43].

Social innovations can be defined in multiple ways. As Murray et al. interpreted: "... new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. In other words, they are innovations that are both good for society and enhance society's capacity to act" ([44], p. 3).

Beyond problem solving social innovations contribute to the creation of new social links, help to overstep public-private division and provide more efficient and sustainable solutions [45].

Caulier-Grice, J. et al. [46] emphasised the importance of the following factors in social innovations: Novelty, from ideas to implementation, meet social needs, effectiveness, enhance society's capacity to act. Social innovations are spatially bounded activities [45,47] accordingly LEADER action groups seem to be adequate hosts or hubs of them.

More effective, just or sustainable solutions can be imagined in different spheres, like sustainable agricultural production, local food systems, social or care farming, social services, renewables, ecosystem and recreation services, co-operation, financial services or local action groups [48]. Katona et al. examining the business and entrepreneurship impacts of social innovations include local webshops in the Hungarian countryside in their analysis [49].

Digital social innovations (DISs) are relatively new phenomena relating to digital tools supporting social innovations through decreasing barriers [50] or providing close connections between producers and consumers. The promoters of DISs can be social movements, enterprises (even under the aegis of corporate social responsibility [42]) or public bodies as well [51].

According to the Report No 25911 EN (Agroecology and Organic Horticulture Research Project) [52] local product chains may have positive impacts from different policy tools. Sub regional LEADER action groups can actively join in many ways:

1. To inform local people about the types of local products, the accessibility of producers in the form of text, photos, maps, etc.
2. To provide public money support for short food supply chains in order to increase positive socio-economic effects.
3. To inform or train producers on needed marketing, promotion, communication, logistic skills and the smart use of information and communication technology (ICT) tools.
4. To develop a labelling scheme to protect real local products from cheap imitations, to content information and guarantee the geographic origin of the product. Well-tried, existing labelling frames usually cover wider geographic areas and make qualitative benchmarks too.
5. To be local hero of good practices with combining the previous ones to set an example to other initiatives.

In our article, LEADER LAGs are examined as managing agents of local product chains. We seek to answer the following research questions:

- How widespread is the presence of local products on the websites of LEADER LAGs?
- What types of products are occurring in the palette?
- Are there territorial differences between the agency of LAGs concerning local product support in Europe?
- Is there a connection between the size or level of experience (age) and the extent of local product management activities of the action group?

The paper structure begins with a theoretical approach based on relevant literature concerning the definition of local product and food chains and related concepts. A separate

unit aims to highlight a number of details of spatial food sociology. The results of our research are described in the next chapter, ending with a discussion and conclusion.

2. Materials and Methods

The study rests on a detailed international literature review supporting the vindication of related concepts of alternative food networks. The main focus was placed on European issues, but some studies with overseas and global orientations were also cited. Our objective with the theoretical introduction was to assign the possibilities LAGs might follow.

The primary research is based on the quantitative analysis of the websites of LEADER action groups. Beyond their information contents websites are important symbolic carriers and identity presenters, they are relevant components of the image of the area. In case of a LEADER action group the website contains the relevant plans, background papers, documents, tender invitations and photo-documentations. Website content analysis is a replicable and recognized primary method in social innovation studies [53,54]. Basic data on LAGs, used for descriptive statistic purposes were retrieved from the integrated local development strategies.

The official EU LEADER LAG database relating to the most recent period (2014–2020) was taken as a population. Their list can be found on the official EU rural development policy website (https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld/lag-database_en). A nationally representative stratified probability sample of LAGs was taken from this framework in which countries with fewer action groups were over-represented (Figure 1). The sampling was implemented through an online random number generator (random.org).

The chosen method has strengths and weaknesses too. On the one hand, it is an economical way of information gathering and it can be implemented without influencing the subject of the study. On the other hand, there are some drawbacks. Websites are under constant renovation accordingly comparative researches must be implemented in a relatively short period. The risk of subjectivity is rather high, and it can be overcome by cross-checking [55]. The level of subjectivity in case of three or more reviewers can be measured by Fleiss' kappa inter-rater agreement index.

The evaluation was implemented by the authors in three rounds in order to cross-check the proposed points. In our case the Fleiss' kappa value was 0.78 what is a substantial agreement in terms of significance [56]. In order to reconsider the disputed cases, author meetings were held.

Among the 202 examined action groups, in 8 cases there were no active websites available, at the date of research. Empirical data was collected from the websites of the LAGs according to an evaluation system that was extended to appreciate the appearance of local products on their websites. The data collection was implemented between March and July 2020, in a relatively short period characterized by considerable LAG inactivity caused by COVID-19. As a result, points assigned to action groups mirror that period.

In assembling the evaluation frame, the following issues were examined (the detailed evaluation table can be found in Appendix A):

- The categories of local products present in LAGs demonstrating the diversity of products scale, possibly the dominance of food products
- The position of local-food-related information in the hierarchy of the website highlighting the relevance of short food chains (SFCs) (if the information is found on the main site then a greater significance can be assumed)
- Types of information and representations (text, link, photo and video) attached to the products may show the importance of local products
- Information related to producers can be basic or more detailed and the latter is supposed to show greater commitment to this issue
- Basic data about LAGs (the year of foundation, number of LAG members, LAG area and population)

The websites were subjected to a targeted examination seeking keywords (local product, local food, SSC, food network, etc.), visual elements (photos and videos) and related

links associated with the topic. Beyond the main website, available on-site sub-pages and attached documents (mainly progress reports) were also reviewed.

Data were collected in a Microsoft Excel table containing separate sheets for every member state. Thematic maps were created in ESRI ArcMap 10.6 software (Environmental Systems Research Institute: Redlands, CA, USA).

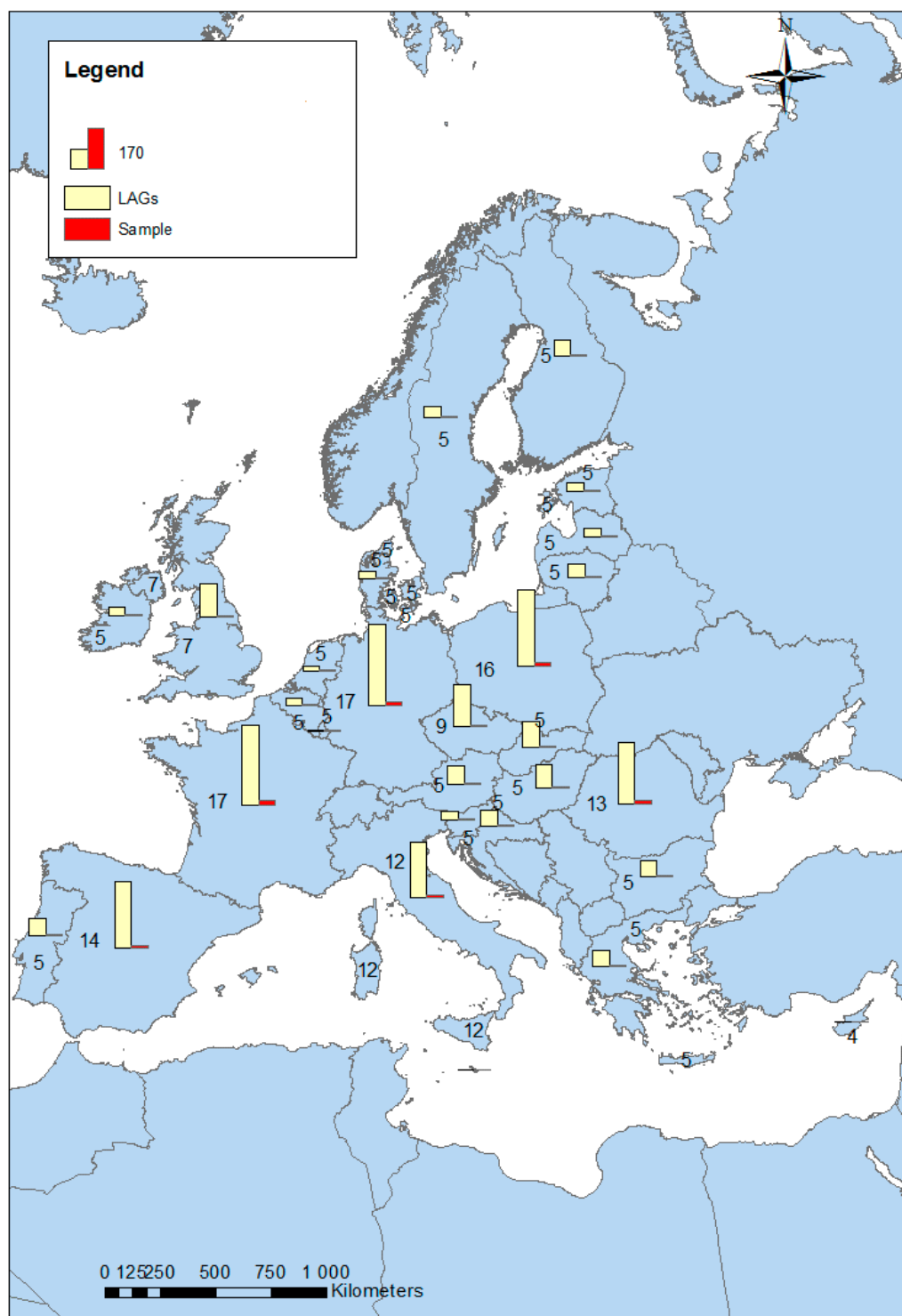


Figure 1. Liaison Entre Actions pour le Developement de l'Economie Rurale (LEADER) local action groups (LAGs) in the 2014–2020 period in EU member states and the number of sampled LAGs (Authors' edition).

3. Results

3.1. Theoretical Approach

3.1.1. Contested Concepts

Concerning the definitions of “local product” and “local food”, it is discernible that the literature often fails to differentiate them. However, it is possible to separate these two phrases from each other because—although related—they do not perfectly match [57]. Defining the difference between them, firstly the different parts of the phrases are examined: The link between “product” and “food”, and, secondly, the issues with the meaning of “local” will be targeted.

Comparing the literatures of SSCs and SFCs, they can be argued to be similar categories, where the definition of the former includes the latter [58,59].

A local product is made of local or locally produced raw materials with traditional, non-industrial technology by micro or small businesses; on the other hand, food means any plant, animal, including a micro-organism, or mineral material, which is fit for human consumption [60]. Consequently, a “local product” is a processed, but not necessarily food product, however, “local food” is intended for human consumption, but is not necessarily processed. The meaning of “local” can be based on geographical distance, referring to the special characteristics of the country in question. Defining SSCs by geographical distance can easily be regarded as an oversimplification, but in the case of practical issues (such as market regulation or support policies) these simple factors can be helpful.

In the USA, even extreme distances can fit into the definition of an SSC (650 km). The Food, Conservation and Energy Act (2008) states that selling products within the same state is defined as local trade. However, according to a civic initiation—the US locavore movement—the distance is only 160 km [61].

In many European countries, this type of mechanical delimitation also exists, usually specifying the maximum distance between the production and consumption of the product to be between 40 and 70 km [62]. According to the EU Joint Research Center’s (JRC) 2013 report, the limits of an SFC can be placed even wider, at 20–100 km. This large variety depends on the characteristics of the geographical location (population density, accessibility and characteristics of urbanity-rurality).

In Germany, there is a similar spatial definition of the SSCs. According to the studies of Wiesmann et al. [63] and Ermann [64], SSCs have a regional scale, a radius of 50–100 km around a certain location.

In France, the SSC is defined on the base of a dual system. According to the first interpretation—“circuits court de commercialisation”—there is no specific physical distance defined. The second (circuits courts de proximité, i.e., close sale) is a sale within a certain distance, where the distance is limited between 80 and 150 km [62].

The Hungarian categorization also defines a specific distance (52/2010 (IV.30.) VM Decree). Here, small producers can only sell animal originated basic products and processed products either in the county of the place of production or in the national capital, or within a 40-km radius from the place of production [62,65].

The meaning of local can be approached through natural or social aspects [61]. The main determining factor can be some kind of natural condition, manufacturing tradition or culture—but in some cases, these factors may overlap [66]. Edward-Jones et al. [67] state that in some cases every product can be defined as “local”, so the origin cannot be an indicator of quality. Accordingly, Brunori [68] categorizes the forms of re-localisation by the “local-”, “locality-” and “localist food” definitions; he assigns three different re-localisation categories: Symbolic, physical and relational.

Beyond distance, the small-scale character of production is also a relevant issue in SSCs. In Hungary, a small-scale producer is a natural person producing raw materials on their own farm and processing it, then, according to product-specific regulations, selling it by taking the quantitative and territorial terms into consideration. These products can only be sold directly or through one intermediary at most. This definition fits into the rules of SSCs and backyard and homemade products as well [69].

The roles found in SSCs are producer, consumer and (optionally) one intermediary at most, so the number of roles is kept at a minimum. Based on the analysis of Bietsch and Hintze [69], direct sales producers have a smaller economic impact, and Jarosz [70] confirms that they are smaller in size, while also having a lower productivity rate. Renting et al. [2] believe that the links of the chain are those who play a role in the production, processing and consumption processes. Mundroch et al. [71] and Renting et al. [2] state that in addition to the producer and the consumer, other participants beyond the economic sphere also play a role in the alternative network, unlike in the case of bigger industries. Kujáni [62] revealed that the short or alternative food chains or systems are a tool used for regional and rural development. An important feature of the SSC is commitment, which can happen through a natural, social, geographical or an economic approach [41,72].

The definition of SSC can also be a legal issue. As defined in Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council: Cooperation, local economic development and a limited number of economic operators committed to close geographical and social relations between producers, processors and consumers. Thus, SSC can be identified as a (local) economic development tool, the structure of which starts with decision making and is based on the principle of subsidiarity. It is also the responsibility of local governments to support micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in agriculture and forestry. The small size of the businesses means that the geographical and social space is also relatively small.

3.1.2. Spatial Sociology of Local Food

At first glance, local food production is an economic issue; however, there are opinions showing the relevance of its social and environmental dimensions as well. The phrase “foodscape” refers to this complexity [57].

The aforementioned contested definitions often contain commitments to the social and governance backgrounds of the phenomenon. Even the phrase “local trade” includes some shades of mutual trust and co-operation among the players of the chain [73]. Recently, the boundaries of different actors have appeared, and so a “civic food network” evolved [2] where “food citizenship” [74,75], “food democracy” [76,77] and “food sovereignty” [78] are central issues.

Compared with mainstream industrial food chain methods, alternative ones integrate producers, consumers and other actors [2]. So-called community-supported agriculture is an alternative label of this [79]. A relevant character of the type is the appearance of flexible production and consumption. From an institutional point of view, because of multi-level governance a greater resilience and sustainability is prevailing [80].

According to the literature, the evolution of the alternative food economy [81–83] is a “transformative learning process”. Spatiality in this progress plays a crucial role in connecting the different actors [74].

Although its price level is frequently higher than that of the supermarkets, local food markets are continuously growing in Europe. Reaching a relatively broad spectrum of solvent demand is an uneasy task for rural economic actors. Internet-based commerce can be an adequate tool for modern farm-to-consumer sales methods [84]. As Mackendrick, N. [57] states:

“Digital and online spaces are another component of foodscapes that deserve more attention” (Mackendrick, N. 2014, p. 18) [57].

According to online sales experiences, the main areas needing to be developed in e-commerce are as follows [85]:

- Creating IT infrastructure
- Increasing the compatibility of the legal background
- Establishing e-commerce platforms
- Increasing and expanding payment possibilities
- Teach e-trade skills

Sustaining e-commerce utilities (digital social innovations [50]) for rural producers is sometimes difficult as people lack the knowledge, hardware and time needed to sustain them (product maintenance, marketing, customer contact, packaging and posting) [86]. In the case of producers in underdeveloped rural areas, an agency sustaining a spatially bounded local/micro regional webshop supporting their sales activities can be impressive.

Urban locations usually play a primary role in food-system innovations [2] but in the case of rural areas—although to a smaller extent—the same phenomena is present [80,82]. According to the theory of the sociology of emergences, underestimated and—to some extent—ignored organizations can promote the spread of social innovations even in remote rural areas [87].

E-commerce is now an integral part of economic development even in remote rural areas [86,88]. Internet-based trade may broaden—very often low purchasing power—local markets; Taobao villages in China are good examples of cases where—even remote—rural areas can harvest possibilities provided by the sector [89]. These businesses show signs of clustering and through them growth and employment can be increased; they also promise socio-spatially inclusive growth.

In these development tools, Rocchi, B. et al. [18] emphasize the relevance of policy. Among EU member states, the importance of community policies is decisive. The Second Pillar of the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) is of primary value as expenditures for rural development can help the prevalence of local direct selling. As smaller spatial units can often be more socially inclusive, small areas like LEADER LAGs can play a crucial role in it as they support local enterprises and evolve as bottom-up, citizen-directed organizations through a multi-folded learning process [90].

Although LEADER LAGs are quite flexible/soft spatial units [25], repeated socio-economic actions, as Giddens [91] states, can strengthen local structures. In the development of the local sector, the information share between different actors is a must. Participatory governance in these cases occurs through networks being more open than hierarchic systems but more rigid than mere personal relationships [92]. For food producers, this network membership is indispensable to co-operate with local authorities and value-added chain members. Such collaborations might have been present before the founding of the LEADER LAG, but this initiative may trigger the former with small-scale grants and co-operation forums [93].

Beyond small-scale financial aid, LEADER communities may provide additional support to their members. Local product brands and smart village development are relevant tools of it [94]. There are good practices in many European countries when LEADER LAGs support such initiatives. In Ireland, the Tipperary Micro-food Strategy Group was created by an expert to support the building of a LAG brand, making an umbrella for SSCs to help the sales of local products [95]. A relevant function of LAGs can be the integration of farmers and other actors with networking. In Austria, a programme named “Bildungssoffensive Direktvermarktung” was created to support farmers with modernized selling techniques [96]. In Hungary, a local LEADER community also supported the “Cserdi miracle”—a case where a village of deprived Roma people successfully created a brand of local products [97].

3.2. The Characteristics of Local Product Support of LEADER LAGs

Although SSC and SFC management are popular tools of rural development and integral parts of the EU CAP, the appearance of local products on LAG websites is not broad. In the case of only 107 (52%) was there information on their websites representing any local products. While 28% of the appearances could be found on the main LAG website, 72% are in a submenu. It seems to prove that the majority of LAGs do not give significant direct marketing support to local products.

The type of information available on websites is generally administrative. In almost half of the LAGs, local products are indicated only in official reporting documents (local

development strategies, project report, etc.). Consequently, text-form information is the majority, while picture and video forms as well as interactive links are rare (Figure 2).

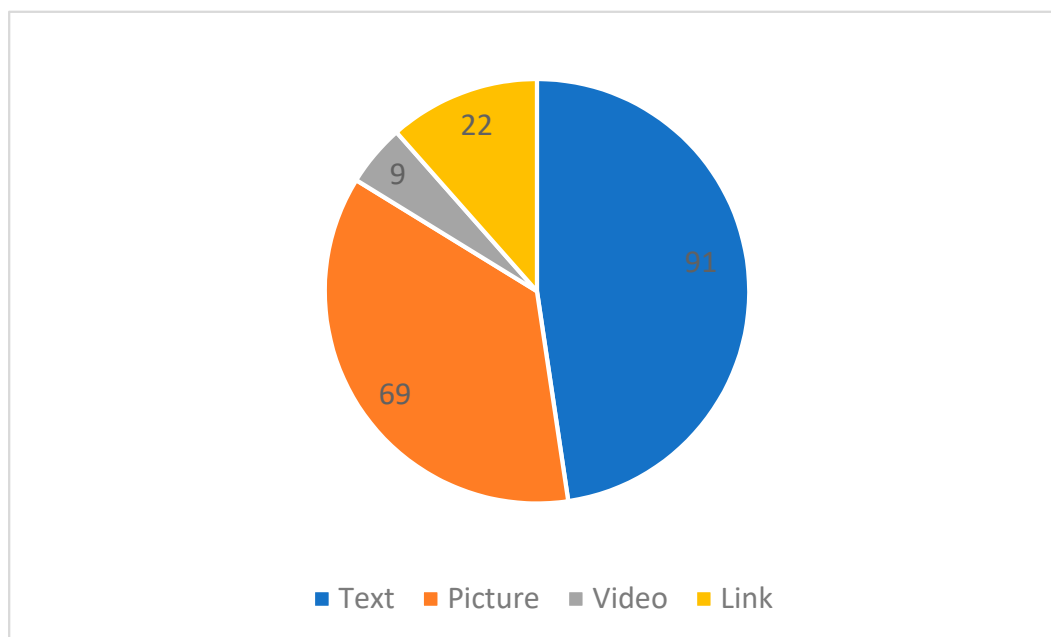


Figure 2. Forms of information available on LAG websites about local products (pcs) (Author edition).

Concerning the types of local products, the majority is food (mainly processed). Non-food artefacts are the univocal minority (Figure 3). Among the member states beyond Great Britain, some Eastern and Central European countries seem to place more emphasis on non-food goods. Croatia is exceptional as its examined LAGs represented only this category on their websites. On the other hand, Sweden and the Netherlands are missing from the map as their analysed groups had no local product references on the sites (Figure 4).

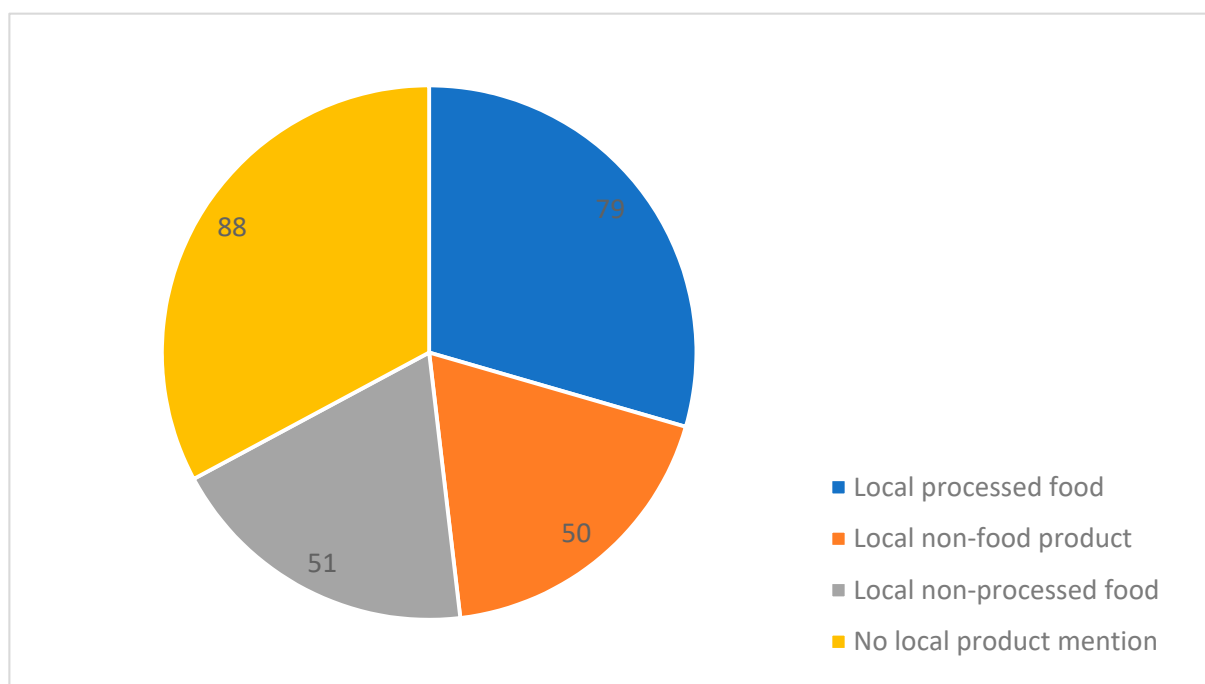


Figure 3. Types of local products mentioned on LAG websites (cumulative number of mentions) (Author edition).

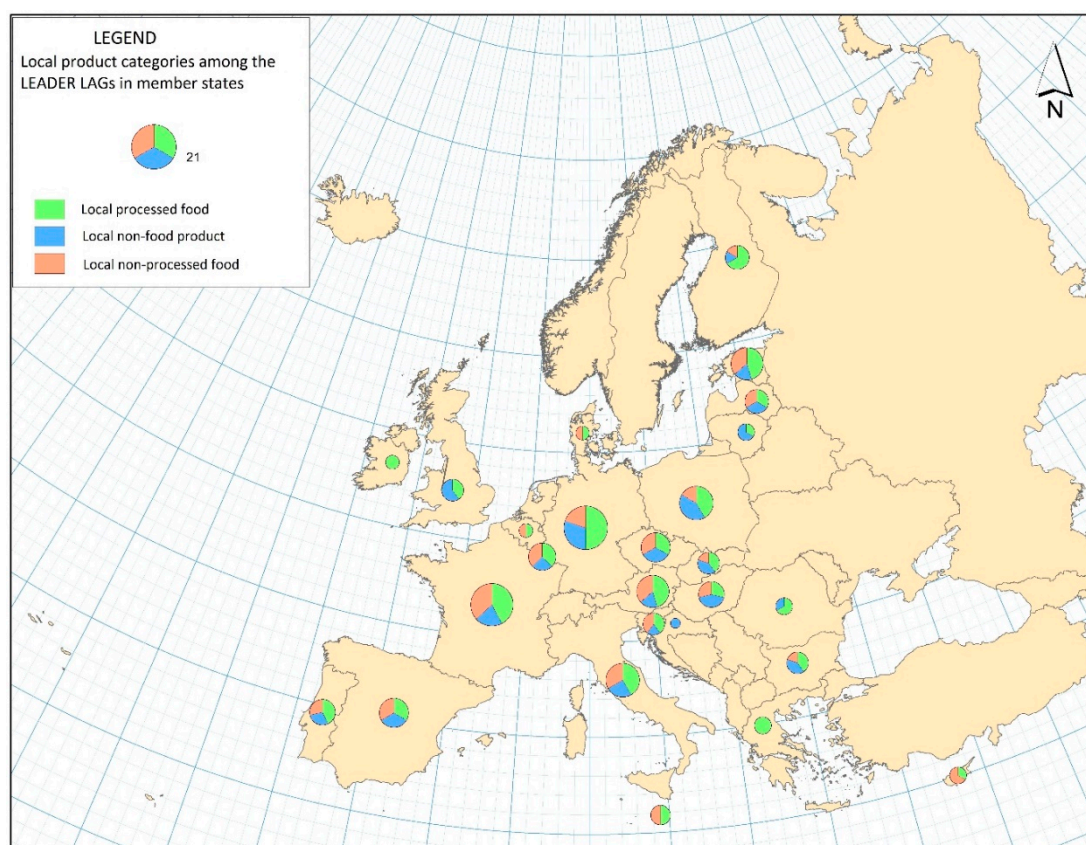


Figure 4. Types of local products in LEADER LAGs (Author edition).

According to the average values of the local product promotion index—compiled by the authors according to the table in the index—the examined LAGs show a specific spatial pattern. The highest values can be seen in some Central-European (Austria, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia), Western-European (Luxembourg, Belgium and Finland) and Baltic (Estonia) states. While Sweden and the Netherlands ranked last, the next lowest ones are in the Southern and Eastern periphery (Romania and Croatia). A relatively low ratio was found in some Mediterranean countries (France, Greece, Portugal and Spain), as well as in Poland, Bulgaria, Ireland and Lithuania (Figure 5).

The possible relationship between LAG population and the local product promotion index point values was also analysed. A weak, almost marginal positive correlation can be observed in this case (Figure 6).

Between LAG maturity and the local product promotion index, an even weaker and marginal negative connection can be seen (Figure 7).

It can be argued that there is no direct connection between the size or the age of the LAGs and their achievement in local product management.

Concerning geographic size (km²), every LAG can be replaced by a circle with the same area and a hypothetical radius can be counted as such. These data can be compared with regulations referring to local food definitions, as mentioned previously (Table 1). The number of LAGs fitting into different categories reveals that relatively bigger (100–200 km) action groups comprise the majority, but they reached the lowest average local product index levels.

The largest category (above 200 km radius) is rare, and more than half have not put any information about local products on their websites. The highest indexes were detected in the 20–100 km grade. The 40–70 km category is widely used in the definition of local product chains. LAGs belonging to this category have by far the best average point rates.

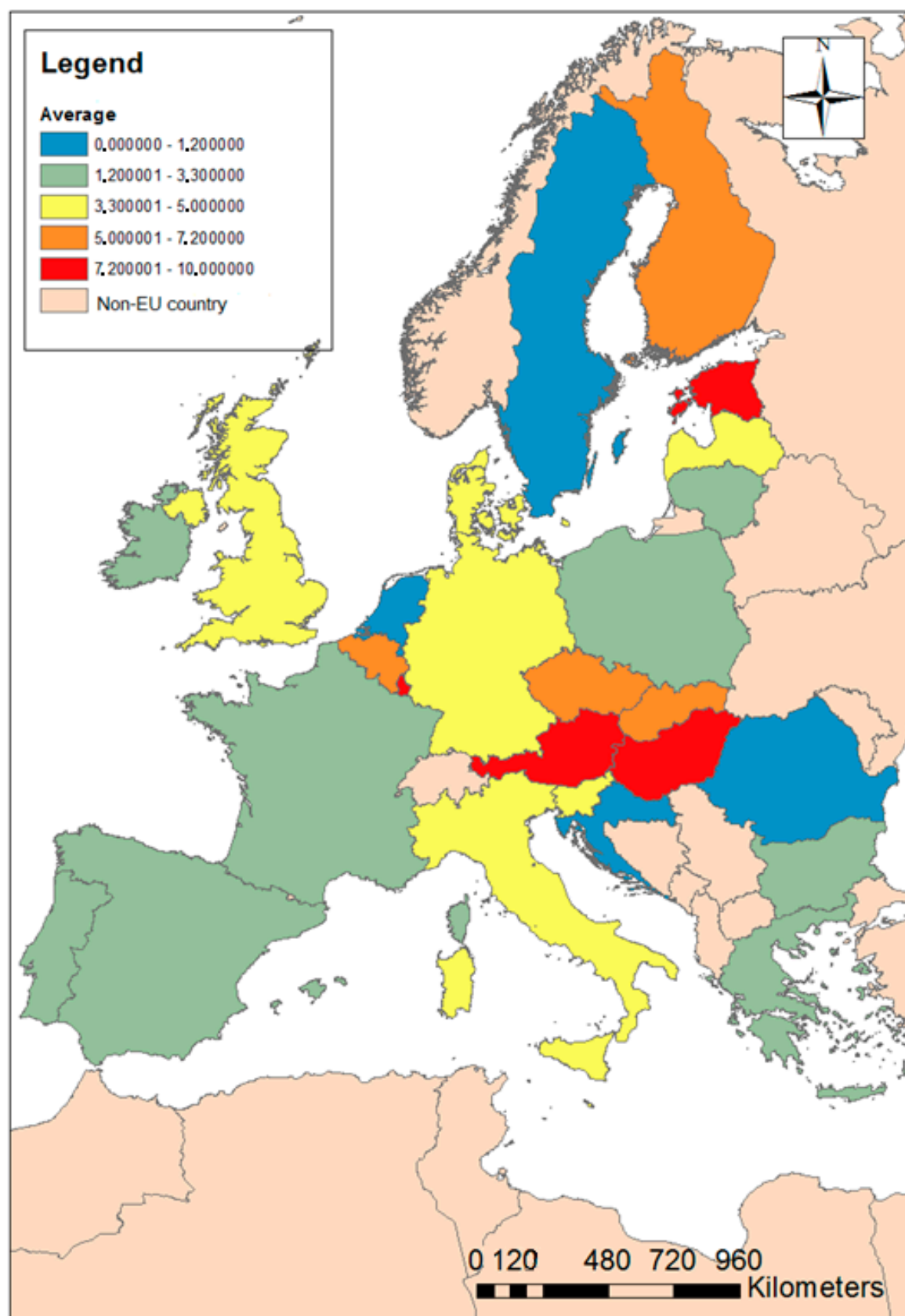


Figure 5. The national average values of LEADER LAGs according to the local product promotion index (Author edition).

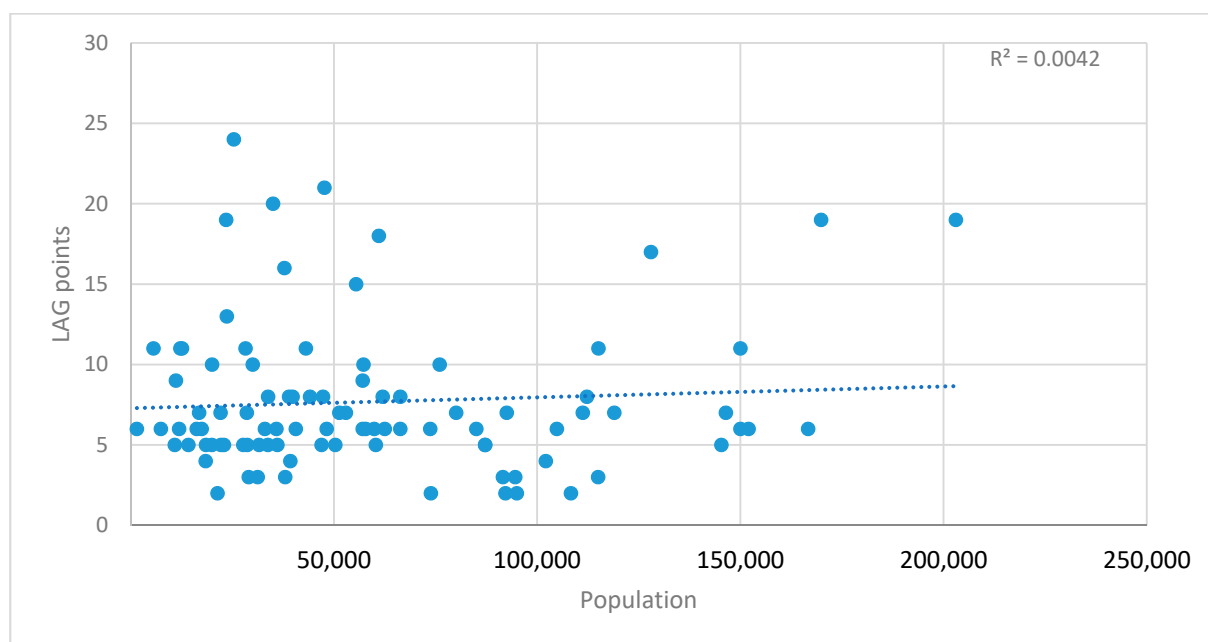


Figure 6. Relationship between LAG population and the local product promotion index (Author edition).

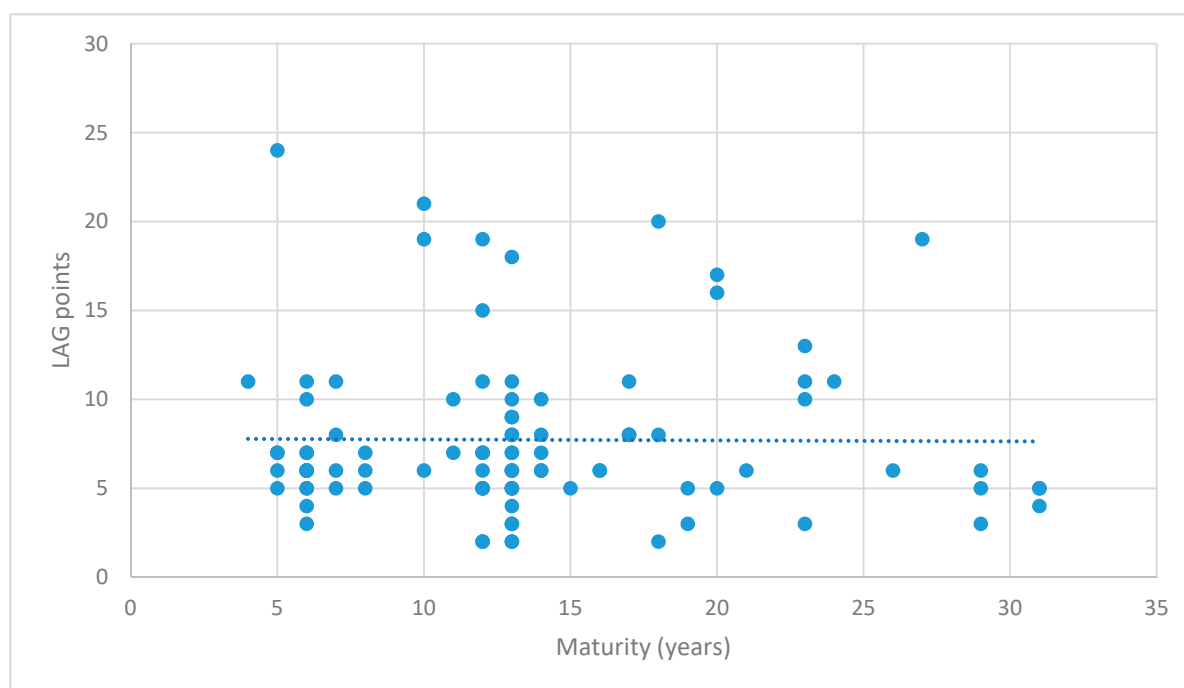


Figure 7. Relationship between LAG maturity and the local product promotion index (Author edition).

Table 1. Some data of the examined LAGs by hypothetical radius groups.

Size Categories (Radius)	Number of LAGs	Average Points	Highest Points	Number of LAGs with 0 Points	Percentage of LAGs with 0 Points (%)
40–70 km	11	5.33	11	4	36.36
20–100 km	57	4.07	24	27	47.37
100–200 km	104	3.72	21	50	48.08
Above 200 km	20	4.80	19	11	55.00

Source: Author edition.

Online shops as possible tools of local food products can be relevant to reach external markets. Among the examined shops, these utensils were visible on the LAGs' sites only in some cases. Indeed, just seven LAGs had any reference to local product online shops, most of which were links to independent shops; only the German Spreewald PLUS had its own site (Table 2).

Table 2. LAGs with website links to online shops.

LAG Name	Country	Webshop Owner	Radius (km)	Year of LAG Foundation
GAL Pays de l'Ourthe	Belgium	external	15.84	2000
Dél-Borsodi LEADER Egyesület	Hungary	external	17.17	2010
Innovatív Dél-Zala Vidékfejlesztési Egyesület	Hungary	external	14.37	2015
Körös-Sárréti Vidékfejlesztési Egyesület	Hungary	external	22.43	2008
GAL Gran Sasso Velino	Italy	external	31	2010
Condado-Jaen—Gdr Del Condado De Jaén	Spain	external	22.2	1993
Spreewald-PLUS	Germany	LAG	30	2000

Source: Author edition.

4. Discussion

With the evolution of the globalized world economy, the era of de-territorialisation has also arisen in food production. Nowadays, a process of re-territorialisation has begun [98]. LEADER LAGs as micro regional spatial formations can be active actors in this process. The geographic scope of local food indicated in regulations [62–65] refers to sub-regional units. As Lukesch [90] states, local brand creation and development can be part of either structuring or consolidating actions. It can be interpreted as a special social innovation. The use of digital solutions should be an integral part of these issues [49]. According to our results, this activity is only partly visible on the websites of LAGs. The representation of local products and short food/non-food chains is usually connected to official strategies and project reports. Only a small minority seems to have advanced, more sophisticated information. Accordingly, most action groups manage this issue as an administrative burden.

Marsden et al. [99] specifies three different bases of short food supply chain development. Firstly, face-to-face connections between consumers and producers produces trusting relationships. Secondly, spatial proximity can support consumers' decisions. Finally, the spatially extended form provides relevant information about the producer and the site is transferred to external consumers in an assimilable form. Although information must be relevant in local product management, the majority of examined LAGs listed only basic and text-based data.

According to some definitions [69,70] SSC networks are associated with small-scale production and direct, usually face-to face selling. The detected presence of webshops even at LEADER LAGs does not support this strict designation. Traditional foodscape borders are crossed in the form of digital social innovations [57,84,85] the so-called “digital foodscapes” [100].

Handicrafts can play a vital role in rural development providing extra income for farmers and added value for the local economy [101–105]. Small non-food products can be sold to tourists and may symbolize the local identity. The action groups investigated by our survey represent these products only to a small extent; at the same time, there

are remarkable national differences. In Croatia, the dominance of non-food products was found; perhaps the dominance of tourism in the country explains this anomaly.

The activities of alternative food networks can be improved by certain interim organizations or institutions. Their existence raises relevant governance questions in the literature. The hybrid governance model [106] assumes a four-sided system in which solidarity based, networked, hierarchical and market stirred circumstances can be differentiated. The relevance of corporate social responsibility must be taken into consideration [41].

According to Brinkley [15], participatory- or community-based governance systems can successfully promote the development of localized SFCs; LEADER action groups as participatory forums of local stakeholders may theoretically foster this process [107]. In the local food sector, their support can also be relevant [108].

In the European Union, the functional and institutional backgrounds of the LEADER action groups is dependent on the national legislative environment. According to their level of authority, there are three types of LAGs (Figure 8). Comparing this with our result concerning the local product promotion index (Figure 5), it might be concluded that—with the exception of Hungary—the best performers belong to the weak administrative category. Accordingly, LEADER LAGs can be successful promoters of AFNs if their professional staff members are able to care about local facilitation beyond mere administrative functions. Although in our sample only a few pioneers could be found, some best practices of AFN supporting local action groups, present in the literature [95–97] confirm this statement.

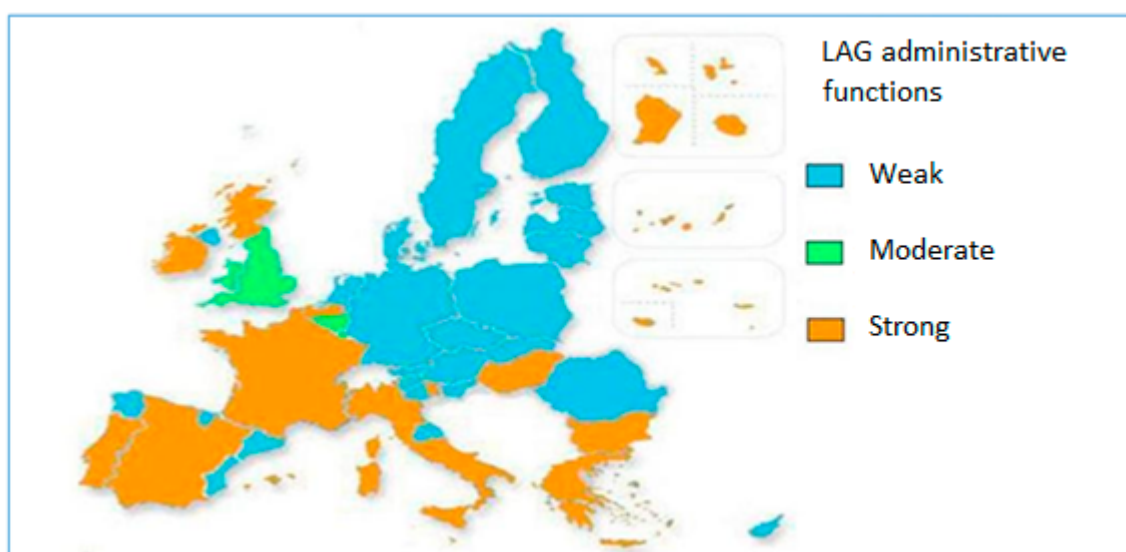


Figure 8. Types of LEADER LAG administrative functions [109].

The literature differentiates two types of behaviours that communities might exhibit towards local food promotion [95]. On the one hand, the so-called Mediterranean model is trying to exploit the popularity of traditional, person and place-bounded products and sell products through advanced marketing methods, even to external markets or tourists. On the other hand, the American and North-European system prefers the community supported agriculture with smaller and local markets in focus. In the former, a higher level of institutionalization is typical. Direct interpersonal networks and direct selling are more relevant for the latter. The LEADER action groups are legally bounded, complex micro-regional entities; as a result, their networking activities overshoot pure local, community supported agriculture and the food sector.

According to our research results, LEADER LAG marketing activities related to local products beyond the micro level are rare, as just a small minority of them had online shops. Detected online shops—the will to sell products beyond the immediate locality—could only be found in a limited number. Geographically, the majority could be found in Central

and Southern Europe. The hypothetical radius of these LEADER communities is between 15–31 km. It can be argued that this is below the average sample size but fits into the distances and legal regulations for local product selling.

According to the extant literature, alternative food networks have been born in North America and in Western Europe [110]. At the same time, in our research the average point values reached by Western European LAGs are generally lower than that of some Southern or Eastern European member states. This may be explained by the nature of Western alternative networks, namely that there are more diverse actors functioning in this realm and the system is more flexible. In this environment, a LEADER action group is just one possible element; SFCs are organized by real bottom-up initiatives. On the contrary, the Eastern type of alternative food networks have more rigid boundaries and institutional backgrounds [29]. In a less developed civic society, centrally initiated quasi non-governmental organizations should play a more active role precisely because it is less organized. Rural areas in the East usually have less developed social networks compared with their Western counterparts, and so LEADER LAGs must be more active to realize progress.

5. Conclusions

Social innovations comprise the development and management of local short supply chains, hence alternative food networks too. It may be concluded that the spatial dimension of alternative food networks is relevant. These can be supported by legislative definitions; however, the national differences are enormous. Beyond geographical distance-based concepts, network- or community-related definitions should be taken into consideration. Multi-actor participatory governance is the key in the creation and management of these systems. LEADER action groups as threefold partnership-based, spatial organizations may integrate the economic, social and regional dimensions of SSCs as social innovations. Aside from providing financial aid to local AFN initiatives, which is their officially declared function, LAGs might also play a more active role in the promotion and management of SSCs.

Although providing information on AFNs, the majority of action groups place only marginal information about these products online. According to our research, most local products connected to action groups are foods. As a result, they can actively support local foodscapes.

Supporting producers through giving information or training producers on needed marketing, promotion, communication, logistic skills and the smart use of ICT tools appear only in some cases.

Labelling schemes would mean a complex management of short food chains, but their occurrence at LAGs is rare. Probably successful and well-functioning labelling systems belong to higher (regional or national) spatial levels.

Huge national differences between detected SSC support activities of LAGs occur. On the one hand, action groups with lower levels of administrative duties seem to be more active in AFN management; on the other, in many Western and North European countries these functions seem to be relatively small compared with Eastern European and Mediterranean LAGs. This can be explained by the statements of related literature, that while the West-North types of AFNs usually sell products directly to local consumers, Mediterranean ones can be characterized by a broader geographical scope of selling. SSCs of the West are mainly managed by non-official networks of organizations, but the East is more bureaucratic, and the success of local products sometimes depends on the support of authorities.

Our statistical analysis did not find any direct relationship between the level of LAG local supply chain support activities and their size or maturity level. This can be explained by the remarkable national differences in the implementation of the LEADER approach. In the future, a country-by-country analysis can broaden these results.

Most of the LAGs that were active in AFN management seem to fit into the size categories of the regulations related to local products and SSCs. At the same time a cause-and-effect examination should be implemented to clear the possible connections.

Although the LEADER is an official European policy, there are remarkable differences according to national and regional specialties. LEADER as a long-standing European Community development programme might be the foundation for an EU-wide SSC support policy with more unified regulations.

The results of our recent study are limited on the one hand by the possible distortions of sampling and on the other hand by the uncertainties occurring during the analysis of websites.

The research should be extended to a direct questionnaire survey of LEADER groups or to a more qualitative interview examination of certain LAGs. Another possibility could be the extension of the analysis to urban community led local development groups.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Local product promotion evaluation system.

Website-related information	
Are local products visible?	
Yes, on the opening page	2 points
Yes, on a subpage	1 point
No	0 points
The category of the product	1 point each
Local processed food	
Local processed non-food	
Local non-processed food	
In what order are they presented?	1 point each
By product group	
By producer	
On a map	
Other	

Table A1. Cont.

In what form can the information be found?	
Text	1 point
Picture	2 points
Video	3 points
Link	2 points
On which website can the information be found?	
On the website of the LAG	2 points
Redirecting to the producer's website	1 point
Is there an online shop?	
Yes, on the LAG's site	2 points
Redirecting to the producer's own online shop	1 point
If there's a map, what is its type?	
Interactive	2 points
Static	1 point
Information related to the producer	
Name	1 point each
Address	
Website	
Phone number	
E-mail	
Product range	
Own logo/slogan	
Other links (YouTube, Facebook, etc.)	
Local product logo	1 point each
Yes, there is a special local product logo	
If yes, is it similar to the logo of the LAG?	
Basic information on the LAG	
The year of foundation	
LAG members	pcs
LAG area	km ²
Population	capita

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