



SHERPA
Rural Science-Society-Policy
Interfaces

MAP Position Note

EMPOWERING RURAL AREAS IN MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE PROCESSES



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MAP POSITION NOTE

GALICIAN RURAL INTERFACES

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Authors: Mariam Ferreira Golpe, Beatriz Guimarey Fernández, Mar Pérez Fra, Ana Isabel García Arias, Edelmiro López Iglesias

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Table of Content

1. Current situation based on background research and evidence.....	3
2. Position of the Multi-Actor Platform.....	3
2.1. Identified challenges and needs	4
2.2. Existing interventions and actions	5
2.3. Recommendations from the MAP	6
2.3.1 Recommendations for future rural policies	6
2.3.2 Recommendations for future research agendas	7
3 Conclusions	8
Acknowledgements	9
References.....	9
Annex 1 Methodology used by the MAP.....	10

1. Current situation based on background research and evidence

Four institutional levels are involved in the design and application of the different policies that affect rural areas in Galicia: European Union, Spanish central government, autonomous community (regional level) and local governments (4 provincial governments and 313 municipalities, 240 of them classified as rural). In this multilevel governance scheme, the delimitation of competences and the coordination among the State, Autonomic and Local levels still present deficiencies. This leads to uncoordinated policies, with duplicities as well as shortages in certain situations (López Iglesias, 2013; Ferreira et al, 2021).

The different policies that affect the rural areas, the ones related to regulation and support of economic activities as well as land planning and basic services to population are characterized by a top-down approach and the absence of social participation mechanisms in the design, implementation, and assessment of the measures. As nuances to this diagnosis, there are consultive structures for the monitoring of the different programs co-funded by the EU, being the most relevant for our purposes the Monitoring Committee of the Galician Rural Development Program, operational in the periods 2007-2013 and 2014-2022. In addition, the Autonomous Community has sectorial advisory bodies composed of representatives of different actors in the rural environment: Consello Agrario Galego (Galician Agrarian Council), Consello Galego de Medio Ambiente (Forestry Council of Galicia), Consello Galego de Medio Ambiente e Desenvolvemento Sostible (Galician Council for the Environment and Sustainable Development). But the available information suggests that the real participation level in those structures and mechanisms and its influence on the policies applied is limited.

In this context, the main example of policy in which there are mechanisms for the participation of the rural population is the LEADER program, applied during the 2014-2022 period and will continue to be applied in the period 2023-2027 through 24 Local Action Groups (LAGs).

The social reality of the rural areas in Galicia presents constraints that hamper the participation of the population in the design and application of the policies that affect their territories. Among these constraints, the following should be highlighted (López Iglesias, 2019; Ferreira et al, 2022): the strong decrease and aging of the population in most of the rural municipalities, the extreme dispersion of the habitat structure, the accelerated deagrarianization of the rural areas that leads to the decline of the community bonds that characterized the traditional rural society, the increasing diversity of collectives that are part now of the rural population (in relation to their economic activity, degree of linkage to the territory and their interests) and the weakness of the associative network.

Within the general framework, in addition to the associations of different types (neighbourhood, women, cultural, sports associations...), it is important to stress the important role played in the organization of the rural population in many areas of Galicia by the common lands communities (Comunidades de Montes Veciñais en Man Común). According to the most recent data, in 2022 exist 3029 communities of common lands with more than 120.000 members (representatives of as many families) (Regional Ministry of Rural Areas, 2022). Other relevant entities for the organization of the rural population and the generation of participative dynamics are the cooperatives. In short, there are around 200 food and agriculture cooperatives that gather around 31000 members and play an important role in the most dynamic agrarian areas (AGACA, 2020). At local level there are interesting examples of participative processes in different initiatives in rural areas, specially related with services for the population, social inclusion, and the labor integration of certain groups (Xunta de Galicia, 2015).

2. Position of the Multi-Actor Platform

Among the sub-themes established for this cycle, the Galician MAP decided to focus on social participation in governance of rural areas. As explained in the methodology (Annex 1), an online survey was initially conducted with MAP members to request their opinion on the main aspects to be discussed (challenges and needs, bad and best practices, recommendations, and the role of the EU.) With this survey, the members

were asked to make a previous reflection, articulating then the meeting around the debate of the initial answers.

2.1. Identified challenges and needs

Identified challenges:

- Increase the possibilities of social participation in the design, application and assessment of public policies that affect the rural areas at different institutional levels (European, State, Autonomous and local levels). In the online questionnaire, the MAP assesses the current participation possibilities with only 2 points out of 5, being especially low this value for the policies at autonomous (1.8) and state level (1.6). This diagnostic was endorsed in the following meeting.
- Correct the limited real participation of rural population in the already existing mechanisms. The MAP considers that active participation of rural population in the design, application and assessment of the policies that affect them is low (1.8 out of 5). This is related, partly, with not suitable participation mechanisms, with previous negative experiences and with the lack of visibility of the results of this participation. For example, young people, that should be the most interested in participating, either do not have the time (difficulties for conciliation and mobility) either have a negative vision of the participation because they do not see their demands reflected in the policies applied. In addition, the MAP members pointed out the influence of a global social context in which individualism prevails.
- Overcome, specially at the local level, informal and patronage ways of participation in the definition of policies in favor of a collective participation that pursues the common good.
- Counteract the influence, in the existing participation mechanisms, of organized lobbying groups external to the territory.
- Modify the role of mere bureaucratic managers that the MAP considers that the State and Autonomous governments have regarding European funds and adapting these programs to the demands and needs of the population in the different rural territories.
- Boost the bottom-up approach in the policies of the different administrations, specially the State and Autonomous governments, as well as promoting at the same time a culture of participation in the rural population.
- Enhance the structure and organization of the Galician rural society, promoting associations fabric and other entities (such as cooperatives) adapted to the current reality. Consequently, the MAP points out that the strong reduction of the weight of agricultural activity caused the agricultural cooperatives to lose their central role in channelling the participation of the rural population, without this role being assumed by other organizations.

Identified needs:

- Establish new participation structures and new participation mechanisms in the existing structures.
- Adapt the different public policies to local needs as a condition for the rural population to be interested in participating in their design and application.
- Offer feedback to the rural population about the result of their participation in the design of policies, showing that their opinions and interests are considered.
- Improve the formal and informal participatory mechanisms, adapting them to the characteristics of the different collectives within the rural population, to facilitate participation and win their confidence. It is not enough to regulate formal structures of participation, but these must be accessible to the inhabitants of rural areas (and not just wait for them to come).

2.2. Existing interventions and actions

In the online survey the example of best practices most quoted by the MAP members were the LAGs that manage the LEADER program in Galicia, which received more than half of the votes, but these were also singled out in some cases as an example of bad practices. The debate in the MAP meeting helped to complete and clarify the examples of best practices:

- SHERPA. The members are satisfied with their participation in MAP because they feel heard. The project has improved their perception on the participatory mechanisms regarding the design and assessment in the European policies.
- LEADER. The LAGs are considered an example of best practice, in as much as they are focused on the development with a local approach and allow the organization and the participation of the territory agents. But some MAP members indicate that the poor functioning of this LAG is far from the ideal model.
- The participatory budgets applied in some rural municipalities were quoted as best practices, even though the social participation is focused, in many cases, in individual claims, instead of collective claims.
- Small scale associationism. The MAP considers that this improves the ability of the population to raise their voice and formulate demands that answer to common interests. Formal associations are not always necessary; the fact of promoting gathering spaces for the neighbors contributes to the organization and participation of the rural population. The role of women associations must be highlighted, as they are considered the most participative collective group in the rural areas, as well as the neighborhood associations where they have a strong structure.
- Communal lands communities (Comunidades de Montes Veciñais en Man Común). These groups of owners of common lands, were quoted as examples of best practices. It should be emphasized that some of them are the vehicle for the organization and participation of the local population and thus, they are revitalizing the territory. Therefore, the structure and functioning of these communities is currently very unequal, due to the depopulation and demographic aging of many rural areas of Galicia.

Regarding examples of bad practices, the MAP identified the following:

- The absence of mechanisms for the participation of the rural population in matters affecting the management of the territory. Examples include nature conservation policies, such as the establishment of the Natura Network or other protected areas, and wind energy installation plans. The green transition is seen by the MAP as an opportunity, but only if it is formulated in an appropriate way. The key is how it is organized and how the wealth generated is distributed. In the case of wind energy installations, there are doubts about the benefits they generate for the local population.
- The Autonomous Administration does not offer real and sufficient possibilities of participation in the decisions on the programs with European funds. In this sense, some MAP members mentioned the poor participatory functioning of the Monitoring Committee of the Galician Rural Development Program (RDP), in which proposals arrive late, with little time for analysis and debate and the attendees have the perception that their opinions are not considered.
- Several MAP members think that in Galicia the LEADER approach is not correctly applied. Sometimes, the LAGs are mere fund managers, losing sight of participation and not having a significant impact in social revitalization. It is also quoted that, in some cases, the LAGs act as relays of the local public administrations. In addition to this, there is limited budget available, especially in the most disadvantaged rural areas since LEADER program funds are also destined to developed areas and peri-urban municipalities.

- In some structures and mechanisms of participation there is an excessive leading role of external organizations to the territory (of state or regional scope), which do not represent the interests of the local population.
- Another bad practice mentioned is the partisan behaviour of many politicians, which discourages the participation of the population.
- The non-application of plurifund mechanisms causes confusion at territorial level. For each program a different territory is delimited, which hinders the participation of the population.

2.3. Recommendations from the MAP

2.3.1 Recommendations for future rural policies

The MAP points out, firstly, the need for **measures that create the conditions for greater social participation of the rural population**. In this sense, actions that promote the associative fabric in rural areas (4.2 points out of 5), community revitalization and the provision of public services that facilitate conciliation and mobility (3.9 out of 5) were highlighted as recommendations. On the other hand, actions aimed specifically at disadvantaged groups to promote their participation are not considered to be of such importance (2.8 out of 5).

Secondly, the MAP shows a high level of agreement that new mechanisms for participation in the design, implementation and evaluation of policies are needed (3.5 points out of 5), because the existing ones are insufficient or do not work adequately. The main recommendations on **new mechanisms of participation** are:

- Force Public Administrations to establish mechanisms for effective participation in different policies. Especially at state, regional, and local level, since it is considered that the EU does encourage participation.
- Application of "rural proofing", given that often sectorial regulations and policies do not consider the impact on rural areas.
- To promote bottom-up participation, establish well-defined local or district structures, with specific and clear functions.
- Besides the formal participation structures, the Public Administrations (specially the Autonomous Administration) shall have professionals that listen to the population, collect their needs, and cater to their demands. In this line, it was stressed the need to review the functions of the District Agricultural Offices, turned into a mere bureaucratic instrument. The MAP believes that it is urgent to recover their role as territorial revitalizing element.

Regarding the recommendations for **the improvement of the existing participatory mechanisms**, the MAP believes that the surveys and public enquiries, as they are currently designed, are not suitable as effective participation mechanisms and are a nominal way of participation, rather than real. Furthermore, it is highlighted that within the Local Administration, the accessibility of the politicians to listen to the individual demands (that could end in political patronage) should not be confused with social participation. The following recommendations are also made:

- To improve the information and dissemination about the existing participatory mechanisms. The MAP thinks that there is an information deficit that prevents participation because the inhabitants of the rural areas do not have information about the opportunities and initiatives.
- Reviewing/updating the agricultural policies and their participatory mechanisms, integrating flexible mechanisms, and using new technologies.

- Better coordination of the different administrative levels. In particular, the perception is that there is great distance between the strategies established by the EU and what finally reaches the territory.
- Provide greater flexibility to the application of some policies, allowing them to be adapted to the reality of the different territories, what would stimulate social participation.
- Boost pilot projects managed with social economy formulas, that exert a demonstration effect.
- When encouraging participation, the voiceless collectives, such as children and elderly people (ethics of care) should not be forgotten, giving them the chance of participating in the design and organization of services adapted to their needs.
- Promoting the role as spokesperson of local associations that are more linked to the territory.

Regarding the EU role in building a more inclusive and participatory governance of the rural areas, the MAP states their scarce knowledge regarding some current initiatives, such as the “Long Term Vision for the Rural Areas”, known by 1/3 of the members and the Rural Pact (8 %), while everyone is familiar with the LEADER program. The MAP has made some suggestions for the future:

- Go beyond public inquiries that carry out European institutions and reduce the take of the lobbies. Regarding public consultations, it is necessary to promote the participation of the rural population, because in these telematic consultations it is frequent that most of the people who participate are not related to the rural world.
- To extend the LEADER methodology, the bottom-up approach, to other policies but introducing improvements in its real application.

2.3.2 Recommendations for future research agendas

MAP insists that, more than new research, an effective transmission to the rural population of the existing knowledge (through transfer, training, and information measures) on aspects such as: EU financial mechanisms, design of the different policies, results and impact of the measures applied, is required.

Specifically, training is requested for public administration staff and policy makers, with the aim of improving the design and implementation of participatory processes and the use of the results of participation, creating a true culture of participation, and meeting the needs of small municipalities.

With respect to the knowledge gaps detected, the MAP highlights that:

- There are practically no studies in Galicia, for recent decades, on the governance of rural areas, the organization and social participation of the rural population. There is also a lack of data and studies on the functioning and results of existing participation mechanisms in the design and implementation of rural policies.
- Regarding LEADER programs, more research is needed on their application in different territories and their impact on the generation of social capital.

3 Conclusions

- The MAP considers that the local population participates to a very low extent in Galicia in the governance of rural areas. By institutional levels, it perceives that there are more participation mechanisms in the policies promoted by the EU than in those designed by the Spanish Central Administration and the Autonomous Community (Regional Government).
- The reduced participation is not only explained by the deficiencies of the existing mechanisms and structures of participation, but also by the lack of social organization and the little interest of the rural population. The last fact is connected both with previous negative experiences as well as with the existence of barriers to participation (conciliation, mobility, etc.).
- The LEADER approach has a great potential as participatory methodology, even though the MAP believes that there are problems in its implementation.
- Associationism, the entities that own communal lands and the social economy business model are examples of best practices and of entities that can increase the capacity of rural communities to be heard by the institutions and participate of governance of their territory.
- The partisan behaviour of some political representatives or the excessive spotlight of organizations external to the territory are quoted as examples of bad practices that must be corrected.

Main recommendations:

- Apply measures that create the base conditions for a greater social participation of rural population: boost the associative fabric, community revitalization and services that ease conciliation and mobility.
- Improving the existing participatory mechanisms, regarding the information and dissemination and regarding the easing and adaptation to different collectives and the actual implementation in the policies applied to the results of the participatory processes.
- Adding new mechanisms and participation structures, overall, for the State and the Autonomous Communities policies. This together with the application of "rural proofing" and the presence in the territory of personnel from the Autonomous Administration that listen, discuss, and gather the proposals and demands from the local population.

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Annex 1 Methodology used by the MAP

The project SHERPA ends in September 2023, which means that this last MAP cycle is of less duration than the previous ones. Thus, it was celebrated only one MAP meeting, instead of the usual two meetings.

Previously to the Multi-Actor Platform meeting, the MAP members received an online questionnaire about participative and inclusive governance in rural areas. Questions were included related to the participation in the design, implementation and assessment of policies affecting Galician rural areas, in general and at different levels (European, state, regional and local) were included, as well as questions regarding the actual functioning of the existing participation mechanisms and to the interest in the participation of rural society. Also, they were asked to assess a series of proposals to improve the participation of local population in the design of policies (or include others, if applicable) and to relate examples of best and bad practices in relation to governance. Finally, they were asked about their level of knowledge about initiatives and programs developed by the EU, such as Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, the Rural Pact, the LEADER initiative, and the European Network for Rural Development. With the questionnaire, they also received the Discussion Paper drafted by SHERPA.

On February 24th the first and only meeting of this MAP cycle was held. 12 members attended: 8 society representatives, 2 from the public administrations- policy and 2 from science. The objective of the meeting was to answer the four key questions submitted for this cycle: main challenges and needs identified by the MAP regarding governance in Galician rural areas, examples of existing best and bad practices, recommendations for future policies to improve the governance and the EU role as support of these interventions. Also, they were asked to give recommendations for the research agenda based on the deficiencies identified in the current state of knowledge on governance in rural areas.

The meeting started with a brief introduction on the subject to be addressed in 2023 and the objectives to be achieved in the present cycle. It was also included a brief reminder of the work carried out in the past cycle and the results of the Galician MAP were highlighted in the final documents of SHERPA with the objective of placing value on the work performed by the members of the Platform. The results of the questionnaire on needs and challenges were then presented, and a discussion forum was opened to discuss, complete and/or clarify the answers. In this meeting the work was always done in plenary, contrary to previous meetings where the attendees were divided into groups for some debates according to the three types of rural areas defined for Galicia. The debate on the examples of best and bad practices started with the presentation of the results obtained in the questionnaire and with the further discussion forum. Finally, the recommendations for the future policies and the definition of measures to encourage social participation following the same momentum were tackled: in first place, presentation of the results of the questionnaire and in second place, debate about the results and development of recommendations.

After the coffee break, the role of the EU in supporting the measures and initiatives was discussed and the meeting ended with research needs on governance and social participation to solve the knowledge gaps detected by MAP members.

Once the MAP meeting was held, a first draft of Position Note was elaborated in Galician and sent to the MAP members for review and additions. The final document was translated into English and sent to SHERPA. Both the Galician and English versions are in the Dropbox folder shared among the facilitator, the monitor, and all the Galician MAP members.

Regarding the methodology, prior to the meeting, a questionnaire is sent to the MAP members, so that they can reflect about the topic of the meeting before it is held. This has the positive effect of introducing them to the subject and that they arrive at the discussions with some idea and/or proposal in mind, streamlining the debates and improving the results obtained. We would like to acknowledge the MAP members for complying with the planned schedule.